

(Continuation)

13:50 - A new Variable

(The quiet, sterile interior of the Medical Command Post was a stark contrast to the controlled chaos of the main camp. The air hummed with the low thrum of life support systems and data processors. Commander Echo entered, his thin form cutting a sharp silhouette against the bright lights. He moved past medics tending to minor injuries and analysts reviewing biometric data, heading directly for the small recovery alcove where Agents Anya and Kofia were resting on cots, still unconscious from the warp event.)

Commander Echo: *(His voice is low, directed at a nearby medic.)* Status report on Iota-10.

Medic: *(Looking up from a datapad.)* Vitals are stable, Commander. They took the brunt of the temporal shock, but there's no lasting physical damage. They're just... deeply asleep. We were about to administer stimulants.

Commander Echo: Hold off on the stims. Let them wake naturally.

(Echo stood by their cots, a silent, patient sentinel. A few minutes later, Anya's eyes fluttered open. She sat up slowly, her movements stiff, her gaze immediately sharp and assessing as she took in her surroundings. Kofia, on the other hand, let out a long, pained groan and rolled over, pulling a thin blanket over his head.)

Anya: *(Her voice is a dry rasp.)* Medical post. Figures. What's the time?

Commander Echo: 13:50. You've been out for nearly fourteen hours.

Anya: *(Swinging her legs over the side of the cot.)* Fourteen hours... feels like a lifetime. Kofia, get up.

Kofia: *(His voice is a muffled grumble from under the blanket.)* Five more minutes. Or five more hours. I'm not picky. My brain feels like it went through a paper shredder.

Anya: *(She nudges his cot with her foot.)* The mission is ongoing. The Commander is here.

Kofia: *(He peeks one eye out from under the blanket.)* Oh. Commander. Afternoon, I guess. Did we win yet? Can I go back to sleep? I was having a great dream about a beach with no anomalous coconuts.

Commander Echo: *(A rare, faint hint of amusement in his voice.)* Not quite, Agent. Get dressed. Both of you. We have a new, significant development. We're convening at Command Post 1 in ten minutes.

Anya: *(Already pulling on her boots.)* A new development? What happened while we were out?

Commander Echo: Let's just say some of the school staff have been busy. We'll discuss it at the briefing.

Kofia: *(Finally sitting up, rubbing his temples.)* Great. More developments. I haven't even had coffee yet. Does this new development come with coffee?

Anya: It comes with a paycheck, Kofia. Now move.

(Ten minutes later, Anya and Kofia, now fully dressed and looking more alert, walked with Commander Echo into the bustling hub of Command Post 1. The main holographic display showed a schematic of the school, now overlaid with new, flashing data points. Echo gestured for them to take their seats at the main tactical table as he initiated a wide-band, secure communication link.)

Commander Echo: This is Commander Echo. I am calling an immediate, priority-alpha briefing for all command-level personnel. Patch me through to Director Petrova, Director Ash, Supervisor Vance, and the Gamma-7 Commander. All personnel in CP1, CP2, and Medical are to monitor this channel.

(One by one, the holographic images of the key leaders appeared around the table. Director Petrova from MTF Headquarters, Director Ash from Site-77i, Supervisor Vance from Area-11, and the grim-faced Gamma-7 Commander from the forward camp.)

Director Petrova (Comms): *(Her image crisp and severe.)* Echo. This is unexpected. I trust this is critical.

Commander Echo: It is, Director. We have an internal complication. It appears some of the school's non-anomalous staff have found a piece of our operation.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): *(Leaning forward, his expression sharp.)* Explain.

Commander Echo: *(He brings up a 3D model of the small, black device.)* Earlier today, at approximately 13:43 school time, a few staff members discovered this device in the school's main electrical room. It's the remote trigger our Bravo Team used to initiate the blackout during Principal Grace's extraction.

Director Ash (Comms): *(His eyes narrow.)* They found our tech? Is our cover compromised?

Commander Echo: Negative. They don't know it was us. They believe it to be military-grade and are highly suspicious, but they have no connection to the Foundation.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): *(A low growl in his voice.)* So we have civilians on the inside who know the blackout was a deliberate act. That's a problem.

Anya: It is, sir. The staff members who found it were terrified. They believe the device is part of the school's strangeness, some kind of anomalous setup. They've decided to remain silent, fearing that reporting it would make them the next target.

Kofia: They're forming their own little resistance cell. It's... admirable, actually. But it means we have loose cannons on the inside who know a piece of the puzzle, even if they don't know who the players are.

Director Petrova (Comms): This is a severe complication. These civilians, however well-intentioned, are now a variable we cannot control. They could interfere with the raid, or worse, get themselves killed.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): What's their current status? Are they being monitored?

Director Ash (Comms): Their conversation was picked up on our internal audio surveillance. They've resolved to stay quiet and observe. For now, they pose no immediate threat, but their knowledge makes them a liability.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): So what's the plan, Commander? We're set to breach tomorrow morning. Does this change our insertion plan? Do we try and make contact with the staff beforehand?

Commander Echo: We continue the primary mission. The containment of the school is our top priority. The students' lives are at stake. However, our tactical approach must now be modified to account for this.

Director Petrova (Comms): I agree. We cannot risk these civilians interfering. We need a plan that neutralizes them as a variable without compromising our objectives or their safety.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): We could extract them. Bring them in. It would secure the information and remove them from the field.

Anya: Risky, Supervisor. If they disappear, it could cause a panic among the other staff. It might be better to leave them in place, where we can watch them.

Kofia: I agree with Anya. They're scared. They're not going to do anything rash. Leaving them be is the lowest-risk option.

Director Ash (Comms): I concur. Extracting them creates more problems than it solves. They are to be monitored, but not engaged. Their safety becomes a secondary objective for the teams inside.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): So my teams going in need to be aware of them. We need their locations, their descriptions. We need to make sure they're not in the line of fire when we breach the classrooms.

Commander Echo: Exactly. Which is why we must adapt our approach. Gamma-7, your teams will conduct their sweep and rescue operations as planned. However, you will be fed the real-time locations of these three staff members. You are to avoid their sectors if possible, and ensure they are not caught in any crossfire.

Director Petrova (Comms): Lambda-5's reality-suppression fields will need to be carefully calibrated to avoid affecting the areas where these staff members are known to be operating. We don't want to inadvertently draw their attention.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): And I am reassigning Iota-10's lead agents. Anya and Kofia, your new mission is to shadow the assault tomorrow. Your primary objective is to maintain a discreet watch on these three staff members. Ensure they do not interfere, and be prepared to extract them if their position becomes untenable.

Anya: A shadow team. Understood, Supervisor. We'll keep them safe.

Kofia: So we're babysitting the internal resistance. Sounds fun.

Commander Echo: This is the only logical path forward. We cannot afford to be blind-sided by well-meaning civilians. We move forward with the raid, but we do so with a new layer of protection for the innocent people who are just trying to survive.

(The holographic figures nodded in grim agreement. The already complex mission had just become infinitely more dangerous. The Foundation was no longer just fighting the monsters inside the school; they were now actively working to protect the very people who had stumbled upon their secrets.)

Director Petrova (Comms): That brings us to the intel gathered by Iota-10 before the warp. Agents, you were inside. Give us the ground truth. What did you find?

Anya: *(She leans forward, her expression grim.)* Sir, we secured multiple high-value files from the principal's office. We have personnel files on Miss Circle, Miss Bloomie, and Miss Thavel, confirming their unsettling histories. We also secured the student files for the three recent deceased: Abbie, Lana, and Claire.

Kofia: We also accessed the archived records for the five original victims from three months ago. However, the files for two of them—Marco Diaz and Leo Gable—were missing from the cabinet. We only secured the files for Jenna Kent, Liam Lith, and Sofia Reyes.

Anya: The absence of those two specific files is, in itself, a significant piece of intelligence.

Kofia: And we found a hidden file on Alice. It confirms she's an extradimensional entity who has established a "domain" within the school. Principal Grace was aware and attempting her own form of containment.

Director Ash (Comms): This aligns with the data we've been analyzing. What about direct contact?

Anya: We had a direct, non-hostile interaction with a student named Engel. He was distraught over the loss of his friends. We established a rapport. He provided the first-hand descriptions of the anomalous teachers and was the first to give us the name "Alice."

Kofia: He's our only confirmed friendly on the inside. He's terrified, but he's observant. He's the one who told us about the "special lessons" and the difference between the "scary" teachers and the ones he trusts.

Dr. Lee (Comms): A child witness. The psychological trauma must be immense. He'll need immediate and specialized care upon extraction.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): This Engel is now a high-priority asset. His perspective is invaluable. Kofia, Anya, your connection to him could be a key factor in a peaceful extraction for the other students.

Anya: We also had a direct confrontation with the three anomalous teachers. Miss Circle was about to engage us before Miss Thavel intervened. Their behavior is aggressive and predatory.

Kofia: They're not just stories. They're real, and they are actively hunting students. We also confirmed the location of Alice's domain, the blue door on the second floor, east. The energy readings there were off the charts before the warp.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): So we have confirmed identities, locations, and behaviors for our primary targets. That solidifies our breach plan for tomorrow.

Commander Echo: It does. The files you retrieved are the cornerstone of this operation. Your interaction with Engel gives us a critical human element to consider in our evacuation plan.

Director Petrova (Comms): Let's move on to apprehension protocols for the bullies. Entity-2Δ Oliver. Asset-2A Zip, and Asset-3A Edward. Oliver is the lynchpin. His relationship with Alice makes him a high-priority target for questioning. What's our plan to apprehend him?

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): He's a bully, but as far as we know, he's a baseline human. Standard apprehension tactics. We'd need to isolate him from the other two first, then move in to secure him. A tranquilizer dart is an option if he resists.

Director Ash (Comms): His known association with Alice makes him a person of extreme interest. The tranquilizer seems appropriate if he becomes non-compliant, but let's not treat him as an active anomalous threat until he proves otherwise.

Lambda-5 Division Commander (Comms): We can support Gamma-7's apprehension team. If Oliver displays any unexpected anomalous traits upon contact, our teams can be on standby to deploy a portable SRA to create a localized suppression field.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): A reactive measure is appropriate here. We don't have hard intel on any abilities. Gamma-7 will lead the apprehension. Lambda-5 will be on immediate standby.

Kofia: And the other two, Zip and Edward? What's the protocol for them? They're accomplices, but they are still minors.

Any: Their previous behavior when apprehended suggests they are not the primary instigators. A show of force might be counterproductive to intelligence gathering.

Commander Echo: Agreed. Oliver is the primary target. Zip and Edward are to be secured with minimal necessary force. De-escalation is the priority for them. We need them coherent for questioning.

Director Petrova (Comms): That brings us to the teachers. Circle, Bloomie, and Thavel. Three independent, lethal anomalies. How do we apprehend them without triggering a school-wide massacre?

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): Simultaneous takedowns. We'll need three separate, highly coordinated breach teams. One for each classroom they occupy. We go in hard and fast, the moment the school day begins.

Dr. Lee (Comms): A word of caution, Commander. These entities are tied to the concept of 'failure'. A direct, aggressive assault could be perceived as a form of 'failure' on their part to maintain control, potentially triggering their most extreme abilities.

Anya: Dr. Lee has a point. We saw how quickly Miss Circle escalated when she felt cornered. A direct assault might be what they expect.

Kofia: What if we don't use a direct assault? What if we use their own rules against them?

Supervisor Vance (Comms): What are you suggesting, Agent?

Kofia: We create a scenario where they *succeed*. We stage a "perfect" class. No failures, no disruptions. We use our own assets to pose as students, follow their rules to the letter. It might lower their guard, create an opening for a quieter, less confrontational apprehension.

Director Ash (Comms): A psychological operation. Audacious. But it could work. It would require a deep understanding of their individual triggers and a flawless performance from our agents.

Commander Echo: It's a high-risk, high-reward strategy. But it's better than a full-frontal assault. We'll develop a protocol for that. Which leaves the staff.

Director Petrova (Comms): Mister Jack and the cafeteria workers. We can't leave them inside during the raid. But we can't extract them beforehand without tipping our hand.

Anya: We need a way to get them out without them realizing they're being evacuated.

Kofia: What if we trigger a fire alarm? A controlled one. It's a standard evacuation procedure. They'd follow it without question.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): And the anomalous teachers? They wouldn't follow a simple fire drill.

Kofia: Exactly. They'd see it as a breakdown of order. They'd stay in their classrooms to enforce their rules. It would separate the non-anomalous staff from the hostiles, allowing us to guide them to a safe extraction point.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): A staged fire drill... it's a classic misdirection. It's clean, it's plausible, and it achieves our objective. I like it.

Director Ash (Comms): It also provides a perfect cover for our MTF teams to move into position. The chaos of the evacuation would mask our insertion.

Dr. Lee (Comms): And from a medical standpoint, it's the least traumatic option for the students. A drill is a familiar event. It minimizes panic.

Commander Echo: Then it's settled. We will use a staged fire drill to evacuate the non-anomalous staff and students. Anya and Kofia, your shadow team will be responsible for ensuring our three knowledgeable staff members are the first ones out.

Director Petrova (Comms): So, the plan for tomorrow is as follows: At 09:30, we trigger the fire alarm. Anya and Kofia guide the target staff to a secure exit. Gamma-7 and Lambda-5 teams use the evacuation as cover to move into position outside the anomalous teachers' classrooms.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): Once the civilians are clear, my teams will initiate the simultaneous apprehension of Oliver, Zip, and Edward.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): At the same time, our undercover teams will begin the psychological operation to apprehend the teachers.

Director Ash (Comms): And all the while, we maintain a hard perimeter, ready to escalate if any of the targets deviate from our predictions.

Kofia: It's a lot of moving parts.

Anya: It's the only way. We have to control the narrative.

Commander Echo: It's a solid plan. It's complex, it's dangerous, but it gives us the best chance of success with the fewest casualties.

Director Petrova (Comms): Good. Before we move on, there's one more asset we need to discuss: Engel.

Anya: *(Her head snaps up.)* Maam?

Commander Echo: Your interaction with him was a critical intelligence break. He is, as of now, the only known non-hostile individual inside that school who has a baseline understanding of the threats.

Dr. Lee (Comms): From a psychological standpoint, he's also incredibly fragile. He's lost his friends, witnessed traumatic events, and is now our primary informant. The pressure on him is immense.

Kofia: He's just a kid, Director. He was terrified. We gave him a small trinket, a necklace, to give him some comfort. He trusts us.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): That trust is our most valuable tool for a peaceful mass evacuation. If Engel trusts us, he can be a calming influence on the other students. He can be our voice on the inside when the fire alarm goes off.

Director Ash (Comms): It's a significant risk to place on a child. What if he panics? What if one of the hostiles targets him directly because of his connection to you?

Anya: That's a risk we have to mitigate. During the evacuation, Kofia and I will make it our personal priority to locate him and escort him out ourselves. He cannot be left to chance.

Kofia: He's seen too much. He's helped us too much. We can't fail him. After what happened to his friends... we just can't.

Director Petrova (Comms): I understand your sentiment, agents. And I agree. Engel's safety is to be considered a top-tier priority, alongside the containment of the primary threats.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): My teams will be given his description. If they find him before you do, they will know he is to be protected at all costs.

Commander Echo: Then it's decided. Engel is not just an asset; he is a protected individual. His extraction is critical. Now, let's move on to the specific timings for the fire drill.

Kofia: The alarm needs to be short, sharp bursts. Not a continuous wail. We don't want to induce prolonged panic, just enough urgency to get everyone moving.

Anya: We'll need to disable the internal sprinkler system for the targeted areas. We can't have our psy-ops teams getting soaked while trying to conduct a "perfect" lesson.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): My engineers can handle that remotely. We can isolate the system grid by grid. Which hallways are we using for the primary evacuation route?

Commander Echo: *(He highlights a path on the holographic map.)* We'll funnel them out the main entrance and the gymnasium exit. It provides the most direct route to our external safe zones. Iota-10 will have teams disguised as first responders to guide them.

Dr. Lee (Comms): We'll need medical triage set up at both exits. We should expect panic attacks, minor injuries from the rush, and acute psychological distress.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): What about Alice? A school-wide alarm is a major disruption of order. How do we predict her reaction?

Anya: From the file Kofia found, her domain is her primary concern. As long as the evacuation doesn't directly breach the blue door, she may remain passive, observing the chaos from her sanctuary.

Kofia: It's a gamble. But it's a calculated one. She seems to react to direct threats to her domain, not general school procedure.

Director Ash (Comms): A gamble we have to take. The fire drill provides the best cover for the civilian evacuation.

Director Petrova (Comms): Agreed. It's the most humane and tactically sound option.

(Suddenly, a new icon blinked on the secure comms channel. A priority-one override. Commander Echo's eyes widened slightly as he accepted the incoming transmission. A new holographic image materialized at the table. She was a woman with sharp, intelligent eyes and an air of absolute authority.)

Lead Agent Rosie Weber (Comms): *(Her voice was calm, yet carried an undeniable weight that silenced the room.)* Commander Echo. Directors. Apologies for the late arrival. I'm Lead Agent Rosie Weber, Intelligence Agency. I've been monitoring this operation from a distance. O5 Command has just assigned me as Chief Supervisor for this case.

Commander Echo: *(Recovering quickly, he nods respectfully.)* Lead Agent Weber. Welcome. We were just finalizing our operational plan for tomorrow's breach.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): *(A small, knowing smile.)* So I've heard. A fire drill, a psychological operation, and a shadow team babysitting civilians. It's... ambitious. I like it.

Director Petrova (Comms): Lead Agent, we're pleased to have your oversight. The situation is... complex.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): "Complex" is the bread and butter of the Intelligence Agency, Director. Now, let's get acquainted. How's everyone holding up? I've read the reports. It's been a long day.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): *(His voice gruff, but respectful.)* We're ready, Ma'am. My teams are eager to get inside and finish this.

Dr. Lee (Comms): Medical is prepped for a mass casualty event, though we're hoping your plan makes that unnecessary.

Anya: Agents Anya and Kofia, Iota-10. We're... processing, Lead Agent. It's been an eventful fourteen hours.

Kofia: *(A weary smile.)* We're awake. That's a start.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): *(Her smile widens slightly.)* I've read your field reports, you two. Exceptional work under extreme pressure. Your handling of the Engel asset was particularly noteworthy.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): Rosie. It's been a while. Good to have you on this.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): You too, Vance. Now, I'm here to ensure we have all the angles covered. So, bring me up to speed. The full, unfiltered picture. I want to hear it all, from the beginning.

Commander Echo: Of course, Lead Agent. *(He gestures to the holographic display.)* The situation began with our investigation into a series of disappearances...

Director Ash (Comms): We identified Maple High as a potential anomalous nexus. Iota-10's initial recon team, led by Agents Sterling and Cross, conducted the first round of interviews.

Anya: Kofia and I were sent in under deep cover. We confirmed the presence of multiple hostile entities, secured critical intelligence from the principal's office, and made contact with a key civilian asset.

Kofia: We also discovered the remains of the three most recent victims, and confirmed the primary anomaly, Alice, is an extradimensional being.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): We've had multiple, direct engagements with the anomalous teachers and Alice herself, resulting in casualties.

Dr. Lee (Comms): And we've successfully initiated Bio-Revival Stasis on the three deceased students.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): We've also apprehended two of the three student instigators, and have Principal Grace in custody.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): *(She listens intently, her gaze sharp and analytical.)* A very busy day indeed. And your current plan is a multi-stage operation involving a mass evacuation under the guise of a fire drill.

Commander Echo: Correct. It allows us to separate the non-combatants from the hostiles, providing a clear field for our apprehension teams.

Director Petrova (Comms): We believe it's the most effective way to minimize civilian casualties.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): It's a sound strategy. It's complex, but it addresses the key variables. Now, let's refine it.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): My primary concern is the evacuation itself. Managing hundreds of panicked students, even in a drill scenario, is a logistical nightmare.

Dr. Lee (Comms): We'll need psychological support teams at the extraction points. The sight of our MTF units, even disguised, could be traumatic.

Anya: Engel is our key to mitigating that. If he's calm, he can help keep the other students calm.

Kofia: We'll need to get to him first. That's our primary objective during the alarm.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): The psy-ops teams for the teachers... that's the highest-risk element. We'll need our best negotiators and behavioral analysts for that.

Director Ash (Comms): I'm assigning a team from Site-19's psychology department. They have the most experience with sapient, hostile anomalies.

Commander Echo: Good. They'll need to be briefed on the teachers' specific triggers.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): Excellent. Now, let's talk about the intelligence that started all of this. The parent's testimonies.

Anya: The initial interviews?

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): Precisely. I've been reviewing the transcripts from Sterling's team. The raw, human intelligence. It's where this all began.

Kofia: They were terrified. And the police completely ignored them.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): They did more than ignore them, Agent. They actively dismissed them. Let's review. *(She brings up a new set of files on the display.)* I've reviewed the testimonies from the parents of the seven missing students—Marco, Leo, Jenna, Liam, Sofia, Abbie, and Lana. Marco Diaz's father. He said his son was terrified of failing math. Not worried. Terrified.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): Miss Circle. It fits her profile perfectly.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): Leo Gable's mother. She said his science teacher was a "perfectionist" who would physically destroy projects that weren't right. She even mentioned a cut on his hand from the teacher's "slice."

Any: Miss Bloomie and her razor. It's a direct match.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): Jenna's mother. She mentioned "secret doors" and "ghost stories." She said her daughter was afraid of her language arts teacher and her "unusual punishments."

Kofia: The blue door. Alice. And Miss Thavel. It's all there.

Dr. Lee (Comms): The psychological markers were present from the very beginning. The fear was disproportionate, pathological. It's a classic sign of anomalous influence.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): And the local authorities wrote it all off as teenage drama and unfortunate accidents. Gross negligence.

Director Ash (Comms): It allowed this anomaly to fester for months, to claim at least eight lives that we know of.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): The parents' words were a roadmap to the truth. They painted a perfect picture of a predatory ecosystem, and no one was willing to look at it.

Commander Echo: It's a stark reminder of why we exist. To look at the things no one else will.

Director Petrova (Comms): And to act on them.

Any: Those parents... they deserve answers. They deserve to know what really happened to their children.

Kofia: After this is over... we have to tell them. We can't just leave them with the "lost in the woods" story.

Dr. Lee (Comms): Post-containment counseling for the families will be a top priority. The grief and trauma they've endured is unimaginable.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): We'll need to handle it delicately. Amnestics are a consideration, but we have issues.

Dr. Lee (Comms): Indeed. Our supply of Class-A amnestics is limited, certainly not enough for the entire student body and staff. Furthermore, broad-spectrum A amnestics are ineffective against deep-seated, prolonged trauma like this. It would be like putting a bandage on a gaping wound; the memory might fade, but the psychological scars would remain.

Director Ash (Comms): And surgical, targeted amnestics are out of the question on this scale. The risk of permanent cognitive damage is too high. We can't risk turning hundreds of children into psychological invalids. It's not an ethical or viable solution.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): So we're left with the truth. We'll get them that truth. By containing these monsters. Right.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): *(She pauses, a thoughtful expression on her face.)* There's one more piece of this puzzle. One more set of parents, so to speak.

Commander Echo: Ma'am?

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): The initial recon team. Sterling, Cross, Bell, and Shaw. I was just re-reading their report from their encounter in the woods. *(Her eyes narrow slightly.)* They encountered two individuals. Scarlet and Dorthy. Claire's siblings.

Anya: *(She exchanges a quick, confused glance with Kofia.)* Scarlet and Dorthy? Ma'am, that information wasn't in our initial briefing packet before infiltration. What's with them?

Kofia: This is the first we're hearing of them, Lead Agent.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): My apologies. A communication oversight in the initial chaos. It seems you two were already en route when that intel was being processed. Let me fill you in. Dorthy is a human female, and Scarlet is a non-human entity, also female, of unknown origin. They presented as Claire's protective older siblings.

Director Ash (Comms): Their anomalous nature complicates things. According to Sterling's report, Scarlet has some form of empathic or telepathic sense. It described the threats in the school not by sight, but by feeling. A "big, empty evil darkness" as they said.

Kofia: *(Muttering.)* Alice. It's a perfect match to that methods, Like the damage from Claire's body

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): Precisely. Which brings me to the promise. Our agents promised them they would find Claire.

(A heavy silence falls over the briefing room. Anya and Kofia exchange a pained look. They know what happened to Claire. They found her file. They saw her body.)

Kofia: Oh, no.

Anya: They don't know she's dead.

Dr. Lee (Comms): And we have her remains in a BRS unit. We're actively trying to revive her.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): But there's no guarantee of success. And even if we do... what do we tell them?

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): That's the ethical dilemma. We have a duty of care to these assets. They cooperated with us. They trusted us. And we made them a promise.

Director Ash (Comms): And you can't lie to a telepath. Scarlet would know instantly.

Kofia: So we have to tell them the truth. That their sister was murdered by Alice. And that we have her... pieces.

Anya: That's a conversation that could go very, very badly. They could become hostile. They could see us as having failed them.

Director Petrova (Comms): We need a plan. A protocol for how to approach them after the raid. We can't just show up on their doorstep with a body bag.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): This is a mess. A complete and utter mess.

Commander Echo: It's a mess we have to clean up. We made a promise. The Foundation keeps its promises.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): We'll need our best psychological team for that. And we'll need to be prepared for any outcome. But first... we have a school to save.

14:32 - The Interrogation Room

(Darkness. A deep, dreamless void. Then, a pinprick of light, insistent and unwelcome. It grew slowly, a dull, persistent glow against the back of her eyelids. A low, steady hum vibrated through her, a sound with no source and no end. Consciousness returned not in a rush, but as a slow, sluggish tide.)

(Principal Grace's eyes opened, slowly, slowly, the muscles feeling heavy and unresponsive. The light was brighter than she anticipated, a flat, sterile white that seemed to bleach all color from the world. It wasn't the familiar, chaotic light of her school. This was something else. Something clean and cold.)

Principal Grace: *(A low groan escapes her, a soft rustle of paper.)* Ugh... where... where am I? What happened? *(Her breathing is shallow, unsteady.)* The light... so bright...

(She blinked, the room slowly coming into focus. It was small, featureless, constructed of a smooth, seamless white material. A single, harsh light panel glowed above her. She was seated, not at a desk, but in a surprisingly comfortable armchair. The air smelled of nothing, a complete absence of the familiar scents of old paper, chalk dust, and fear that permeated her school.)

Principal Grace: *(Her eyes dart around the small space, taking in the alien environment.)* A window... but it's completely black. No door that I can see. Just... white grayish walls. It's like a box. This isn't the nurse's office. This isn't anywhere in the school. *(Her thoughts begin to clear, fragments returning.)* I remember... running. The files... the janitors. Anya... Kofia. I had to stop them. Then... a sting. My neck...

(She tried to lift her hand to touch her neck, to feel for the source of the phantom sting. But her arm wouldn't move. She blinked again, a new, cold dread beginning to cut through the fog of sedation. She looked down. A glint of metal. Her hand was cuffed, a single, heavy restraint locking her wrist to the solid armrest of the chair.)

Principal Grace: *(Panic, sharp and electrifying, shoots through her. Her heart begins to hammer against her thin ribs.)* Handcuffed?! What... what is this? They captured me... they weren't janitors... *(She tests the restraint, pulling against it, the metal clinking softly in the silent room. It's useless. She's a prisoner.)* The files... they have them. They know about Alice. They know everything. It's over... all for nothing. They know.

(The full weight of her situation crashed down upon her. She was alone, a captive of the very people she had underestimated, held within the cold, sterile walls of their mobile command post. The interrogation room felt like a tomb, and the silence was no longer peaceful, but suffocating. All she could do was wait.)

(Her gaze swept the room again, from the featureless white-grayish walls to the single, unnerving black window that offered no reflection and no view of the outside world. She

noted the single light panel above, casting no shadows. Her eyes finally settled on the seamless joint where the wall met the floor, searching for a door, a crack, any sign of an exit, but finding none.)

(Her gaze swept the room again, from the featureless white-grayish walls to the single, unnerving black window that offered no reflection and no view of the outside world. She noted the single light panel above, casting no shadows. Her eyes finally settled on the seamless joint where the wall met the floor, searching for a door, a crack, any sign of an exit, but finding none.)

14:33 - Command Post 2

(In the observation room adjacent to Principal Grace's cell, Agent Sarah and Agent Benedict sat watching a bank of monitors. The one-way mirror in front of them showed Grace, now awake and visibly distressed. Sarah's eyes widened slightly as she saw the principal begin to test her restraints.)

Agent Sarah: *(She leans forward, tapping Benedict on the shoulder.)* Hey, Benedict. We've got movement. Subject Grace is coming to.

Agent Benedict: *(He looks up from his datapad, his expression sharpening.)* About time. I was starting to think Anya's watch was a bit too effective.

Agent Sarah: She's looking around. Seems disoriented but aware. Should I notify Agent Thorne?

Agent Benedict: Absolutely. Get him on the line. He's been waiting for this.

The Cold Equations

Meanwhile, at Command Post 1

(The tactical briefing continued, the holographic map of Maple High glowing in the center of the room. The discussion had moved to the specifics of the psychological operation against the anomalous teachers.)

Director Ash (Comms): The primary risk of the psy-ops is miscalculation. If our undercover team fails to perfectly emulate the expected student behavior, it could trigger a hostile reaction before the apprehension teams are in place.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): My breach teams will be staged, but they'll be cold. If the psy-ops goes sideways, their reaction time will be measured in seconds. Seconds we might not have if Miss Circle decides to get... pointy.

Kofia: The key will be the initial approach. Our agents can't just walk in. They need a plausible reason to be in that specific class, at that specific time.

Anya: We could use the fire drill evacuation as a pretext. Have them "return" to the wrong classroom in the confusion, appearing lost and flustered. It would fit the profile of a disoriented student.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): That's a solid insertion vector. It makes them appear vulnerable, non-threatening.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): It might even appeal to the teachers' sense of order. They'll see it as an opportunity to enforce their rules on a student who has failed at following evacuation protocol. It plays right into their pathology.

Dr. Lee (Comms): From a psychological perspective, it's perfect. It establishes the power dynamic in their favor from the outset, which should lower their initial suspicion.

Director Petrova (Comms): A good plan. But what about the specifics of their performance? What happens if they're given a pop quiz?

Director Ash (Comms): Our undercover assets will be equipped with subcutaneous data transmitters. Our analysts will feed them the correct answers in real-time. They will be perfect students.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): So we're banking on our agents being good actors and our tech holding up against an unknown anomalous influence. A lot of variables.

Kofia: It's the best plan we've got. Better than sending your men into a meat grinder.

Anya: We have to control the engagement. This is how we do it.

(Just as Commander Echo was about to speak, the hushed, urgent voice of Agent Sarah from Command Post 2 cut through the main channel.)

Agent Sarah (Comms): All command staff, this is CP2 holding. Apologies for the intrusion. Subject Grace is awake.

Commander Echo: *(His head snaps up.)* Acknowledged, CP2. Is she stable?

Agent Sarah (Comms): Vitals are steady, but she appears agitated. She's aware she's restrained.

Director Petrova (Comms): She's awake. Finally. This is our chance to get some real answers.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): Thorne. You're the primary interrogator. This is your cue. We need to know what she knows about that Delta symbol. It's the biggest unknown we have.

Dr. Lee (Comms): And her psychological state is critical. We need to know if she's a victim, a collaborator, or something else entirely.

Anya: A word of caution, sirs. She was terrified when we apprehended her. A heavy hand will make her shut down completely.

Dr. Lee (Comms): She's the key to understanding the school's history. We can't afford to break her.

Gamma-7 Commander (Comms): Let's just hope she's willing to talk.

(Agent Thorne, who had been listening silently, stood up, his holographic form becoming the center of attention. He was no longer a passive observer; he was the lead interrogator, and his work was about to begin.)

Agent Thorne: *(His voice is calm, professional.)* Understood. I'm heading to the interrogation room now.

Commander Echo: What do you need, Thorne?

Agent Thorne: I need her complete file, including Anya and Kofia's initial report on her capture. I want to know her state of mind when they found her.

Anya: She was furious, then terrified. She knew we had the files. She was trying to protect the school's secrets. Or her own.

Agent Thorne: Noted. I also want a pot of chamomile tea. Unsweetened. And two cups.

Dr. Lee (Comms): The tea?.

Agent Thorne: It's a gesture of civility, Doctor. It reminds the subject that they are a person, not just a prisoner. It can be... disarming.

Director Petrova (Comms): A classic, i guess. Do it.

Agent Thorne: I'll need a direct, secure line to a psychological analyst during the interview. I want real-time feedback on her micro-expressions and vocal inflections.

Dr. Lee (Comms): I'll have one of my best on the line for you, Thorne. I'll patch in Dr. Julian Croft. His work on trauma-induced anomalous cognitions is second to none.

Lead Agent Weber (Comms): A good choice. He'll see the patterns she's trying to hide.

Agent Thorne: Excellent. I'm leaving this briefing. Supervisor Vance, I trust you can continue refining the evacuation protocols in my absence.

Supervisor Vance (Comms): Of course, Thorne. We'll have a final plan ready for your review post-interrogation.

Agent Thorne: Good. Commander Echo, ensure the area around Command Post 2 is kept clear. I want no interruptions.

Commander Echo: The area is secure. Good luck, Thorne.

Agent Thorne: Luck is for amateurs, Commander. I have a job to do.

(Agent Thorne's hologram flickered and vanished from the briefing room, his focus now entirely on the woman waiting in the sterile white-grayish room, the woman who held the key to the entire operation.)

(Agent Thorne's hologram flickered and vanished from the briefing room, his focus now entirely on the woman waiting in the sterile white-grayish room, the woman who held the key to the entire operation.)

14:38 - The Interrogation Room

The stark, white-grayish interrogation cell of Command Post 2 felt small, suffocating. Principal Grace sat alone at a simple metal table, her form still deflated, the weight of her capture a palpable force. Her eyes, however, were not entirely blank. They flickered with a new kind of wonder, tinged with apprehension. Who were those people? she mused, thinking of Agent Thorne, his unwavering yet comforting voice. And earlier, the janitors, Anya and Kofia. She'd seen them before, often. But the speed, the precision, the strange watch... they weren't mere janitors. They were connected to these people. To the ones who now knew her secrets, and perhaps, the school's deepest terrors.

Thirty seconds later, a soft but insistent BUZZ echoed through the room. Grace flinched, her head snapping up towards the wall opposite the mirror. A section of the wall slid open with a near-silent hiss, revealing a doorway she hadn't seen before.

Agent Thorne stepped inside. He was calm, his expression unreadable. He carried a small tray with two steaming cups of tea. The door slid shut behind him, the sound sealing them in together. Grace watched him, her body rigid with terror, her hands still cuffed to the chair. She said nothing, simply staring, horrified, as he approached.

Thorne moved to the table and placed the tray down. He slid one cup towards her, the gentle aroma of chamomile filling the sterile air. He then sat down opposite her, taking a slow sip from his own cup. He didn't speak immediately, allowing the silence and the simple gesture to work on her frayed nerves.

Agent Thorne: *(His voice was calm, measured, devoid of accusation.)* My name is Agent Thorne. I work for an organization dedicated to understanding and containing situations like the one at your school. Our primary goal is to ensure the safety of civilians. That means your staff, and most importantly, your students.

Grace's eyes were wide with terror, her breathing shallow. She stared at him, unable to form words, her mind a whirlwind of fear and confusion.

Agent Thorne: *(He continued, his tone gentle and reassuring.)* I know you are frightened. You have been carrying an unimaginable burden, alone, for a very long time. We are not here to punish you, Principal. We are here to help. Our operation is already in motion, but the information you hold could be the key to saving every single child in that school without further incident.

He paused, letting his words sink in. He could see the conflict in her eyes, the war between her ingrained secrecy and her deep-seated fear for her students.

Agent Thorne: We know about the files. We know about the teachers. We know about Alice. We are not your enemy. The things inside that school are the enemy. We want to help you fight them. But to do that, we need you to talk to us. We need your help.

He waited patiently. The silence stretched, broken only by the low hum of the command post's systems. Grace's gaze dropped from his face to the steaming cup of tea, then back to him. A single, slow tear traced a path down her cheek.

Agent Thorne: It's alright. Take your time. We have a lot to discuss. Can you start by telling me your name?

Principal Grace: *(Her voice was a soft, dry rustle, barely audible, but it was a start.)* Grace. Principal Grace.

Agent Thorne: *(He offered a small, reassuring nod, his face holding a comforting expression.)* Thank you, Principal Grace. It's good to hear your voice. Now, can you tell me what happened? From the beginning.

Principal Grace: *(She took a slow, deliberate breath, her form seeming to settle. The dam of her long-held secrets was beginning to crack.)* I... I will tell you. Everything.

Agent Thorne: Let's start with the children. The five from three months ago. Marco, Leo, Jenna, Liam, and Sofia. You kept files on them. Why?

Principal Grace: *(She flinched at the names, a fresh wave of pain crossing her features.)* I had to. I had to keep a record. No one else would. The police... they didn't believe the stories. They didn't see the patterns. I was the only one who saw it all. The files were my... my proof. My sanity.

Agent Thorne: Proof of what, Principal?

Principal Grace: That it wasn't random. That it wasn't just... accidents. It was them. The teachers. A failed math quiz for Marco. Then, Leo F-Failed his science test. A... door for Jenna and Liam, a cruel prank by Oliver that led them right to Alice. And Sofia... she learned too much. She was going to tell someone. Alice... Alice made her stop.

Agent Thorne: Did the parents know? Did you ever try to tell them the truth about what was happening to their children?

Principal Grace: *(A dry, humorless laugh escapes her, a sound of breaking twigs.)* Tell them what? That their children were being... erased? By teachers they trusted? That a monster from another place was consuming students in a hidden room? They would have thought I was mad. They would have burned the school to the ground. It would have been chaos. More children would have been hurt. I thought... I thought I could contain it. Protect the others by keeping the secret.

Agent Thorne: You were trying to protect them by shouldering the burden yourself. That's an admirable, if impossible, task. You mentioned trying to secure the school. What made it so difficult?

Principal Grace: *(She looked around the sterile room, as if seeing the walls of her own school.)* The building is just bricks and mortar. It's them. The teachers. They have... influence. They can be anywhere, it seems. Security cameras malfunction at the exact wrong times. Key records go missing from locked offices. It's impossible to track anything, to secure anything, because they control the flow of information. It's like they have eyes and ears everywhere. They're always one step ahead.

Agent Thorne: Which brings us back to the files. You kept them, even knowing the risk. Why not destroy them? Why keep a record of such horrors?

Principal Grace: *(Her voice cracked.)* Because it was the only thing I could do! I couldn't fight them. I couldn't stop Alice. But I could remember. I could write it down. So that if... if someone like you ever came... there would be a record. There would be a truth for someone to find. I was so alone.

Agent Thorne: Well, you're not alone anymore, Principal. We are here. And we believe you. Now, tell me about Alice. You said you didn't know her past, but the file you kept... it was very detailed. Why did you not know more? Why not report her to a higher authority?

Principal Grace: *(She visibly trembled, a faint rustle emanating from her.)* Report her? To who? The school board thought my budget requests for "structural reinforcement" were strange enough. Who could I tell? "Excuse me, there's a being from another reality living in a closet on the second floor, and she eats children"? And I didn't know more because I was terrified to find out. Every time I tried to investigate, to get closer to the blue door... one of them would stop me. Not overtly, never physically. But there would be a sudden, urgent crisis I'd have to deal with on the other side of the school. A fire alarm would be pulled. A student would have a medical emergency. They orchestrated these events perfectly to keep me away. It was their way of protecting her, of keeping me from learning the truth.

Agent Thorne: So you were trapped. A prisoner in your own school, trying to keep a lid on a pot that was boiling over.

Principal Grace: *(She nodded, a single tear falling onto the table.)* Yes. A prisoner. For years.

Agent Thorne: *(He leaned forward, his voice maintaining its gentle, comforting tone.)* Thank you, Principal Grace. Your courage in telling us this... it is not in vain. We are going to help you. We are going to help your students. You have my word.

Principal Grace: *(She looks up, her eyes filled with a desperate, fragile hope.)* Help me? How? And... the janitors... Anya and Kofia. Are they... are they with you? They seemed... different. They were kind.

Agent Thorne: *(A small, reassuring smile.)* Yes. They are two of my best agents. They were inside to understand the situation, to gather the very files you protected. Their kindness was genuine, Principal. It's a part of our protocol to de-escalate, to build trust. We are not here to conquer, but to contain and protect.

Principal Grace: *(She lets out a shaky breath of relief.)* I knew it. I knew they weren't just janitors. So... what happens to me now? You have the files. You know everything. Am I... am I your prisoner?

Agent Thorne: You are in our protective custody. There is a difference. You are not a criminal, Principal Grace; you are a critical asset. You are the single most important source of intelligence we have on this anomaly. Your knowledge of the teachers' behaviors, Alice's patterns... it is invaluable.

Principal Grace: So... you're not going to... lock me away?

Agent Thorne: We are going to keep you safe. Right now, you are safer here than anywhere else in the world. We need your continued cooperation. We need you to help us build a plan that will get every single one of those children out of that school alive.

Principal Grace: *(Her gaze drops to her cuffed hand.)* And this?

Agent Thorne: A temporary precaution. Until we can be certain of the full situation. You have been under immense, prolonged anomalous exposure. We need to ensure your own stability, for your own sake. We will make you more comfortable as soon as our medical team gives the all-clear.

Principal Grace: *(She looks back at him, a flicker of her old, authoritative self returning, tempered by a newfound weariness.)* And what do you need from me? What more can I possibly tell you?

Agent Thorne: Everything. We need to talk about the school's environment. The "normal" teachers. The students. We need to understand the world you've been forced to live in. We need to see it through your eyes.

Principal Grace: *(She takes a deep, shuddering breath, the memories flooding back.)* I was assigned to Maple High twenty years ago. It was my first principal position. I was so proud. But even then... it felt wrong. The children were too quiet. The teachers were too... rigid. There was a story, a rumor, about the principal before me. They said he just... walked into the woods one day and never came back. I dismissed it. A ghost story.

Agent Thorne: But it wasn't, was it?

Principal Grace: *(She shakes her head, a low, mournful sound.)* No. I found his notes. Hidden. He wrote about the "failures." About the teachers. He was trying to fight it. He was trying to get help. And then he was gone. I knew then... I knew I was alone. I inherited his war. But I chose a different path. I became a tyrant.

Agent Thorne: A tyrant?

Principal Grace: I made the rules stricter than ever before. I became an authoritarian figure, someone even they would fear. I thought if I could control every aspect of the school, if I could prevent any student from ever failing, from ever making a mistake... then Miss Circle, Miss Bloomie... they would have no reason. No trigger. They would starve. That's why they killed in secret. They were afraid of me catching them breaking the rules, of me finding out they had found a "failure."

(The dam finally broke. A wave of profound, soul-crushing grief washed over her. She began to sob, her body wracked with the weight of two decades of fear and failure. Her form trembled, the sound of her weeping a raw, heartbreaking sound in the sterile room.)

Principal Grace: *(Her voice breaks, a sob catching in her throat.)* But I failed. Every year... there were fewer and fewer students at graduation. And more and more... empty desks. It's my fault. All of them. I should have done more. I should have... I should have run.

Agent Thorne: *(He waits a moment, letting the initial wave of grief pass. Then, his voice is a soft, steady anchor in her storm.)* Grace. It is not your fault. You were a soldier in a war you didn't know how to fight, with no army and no weapons. You did what you could. You survived. And you kept a record. You gave us the truth.

Principal Grace: *(She looks up, her face a mask of misery.)* But the children...

Agent Thorne: The children you couldn't save... we will honor their memory by saving the ones we can. You have given us the tools to do that. For that, you have our gratitude. And our protection.

(He reaches forward and, with a soft click, undoes the handcuff on her wrist.)

Agent Thorne: We are on the same side, Principal. It's time you started to believe that.

(Grace stares at her freed hand, then back at Thorne, a flicker of disbelief in her eyes. The simple act of trust, after so long in isolation, was almost too much to comprehend.)

Agent Thorne: We're done for now. You need to rest. We will talk more later. There is still much to discuss. For now, just stay here. You are safe.

(He stands, his movements calm and deliberate.)

Principal Grace: Wait...

(Thorne pauses, turning back to her.)

Agent Thorne: Yes?

Principal Grace: *(She gestures to the files on the table.)* You have everything you need? You're... you're really going to stop them?

Agent Thorne: We have a plan. And with your help, it is a much stronger one. We will contain them, Principal. All of them.

(The wall slides open with a soft buzz. He gives her one last, reassuring nod before stepping out, the door hissing shut behind him, leaving Grace alone with her thoughts and the first glimmer of hope she had felt in twenty years.)

(Grace stared at the seamless wall where the door had been, then down at her free hand. She slowly reached for the cup of tea, its warmth a small, grounding sensation. She took a sip. It was just tea, but in that moment, it felt like a lifeline. The protection they offered... the way they spoke... maybe, just maybe, her long, lonely war was finally over.)

(The seamless white-grayish wall slid shut with a soft hiss, sealing Principal Grace in the silent interrogation room once more. Agent Thorne stood in the corridor for a long moment, his back to the closed door, his expression unreadable as he processed the torrent of horrifying truths he had just heard. He took a deep, centering breath, then turned and walked towards the observation room.)

(He entered the viewing room, where Agents Anya, Kofia, and the two Command Post 2 personnel, Sarah and Benedict, were watching the monitors in stunned silence. The audio feed from the interrogation had been broadcast to them live. They all looked up as Thorne entered, their faces a mixture of shock, pity, and grim understanding.)

Agent Sarah: *(Her voice is a hushed whisper.)* My God... twenty years. She's been living in that nightmare for twenty years.

Anya: *(She shakes her head slowly, her gaze still fixed on the monitor showing Grace sitting alone.)* Her strategy... to become a monster to control other monsters. It's... a terrible kind of logic.

Kofia: It explains why the teachers were so careful. Why they only acted when there were no witnesses. They weren't just afraid of getting caught; they were afraid of *her*.

Agent Benedict: And to think, we had her flagged as a potential collaborator. She was the only thing holding that place together, in her own twisted way.

Agent Thorne: *(He walks over to the main console, leaning on it wearily.)* She's broken. But she's also our best asset. She's finally on our side. The information she provided... it's invaluable.

Anya: Did you believe her? About not knowing the full extent of it?

Agent Thorne: I did. She was trying to manage a situation she could never hope to control. She focused on preventing "failures" because it was the only tangible thing she could do. The disappearances... she logged them, but she was powerless to stop them.

Kofia: So what's our next move? We have her testimony. It confirms everything we suspected and more.

Agent Thorne: We proceed with the plan. But now, we do so with a much clearer picture of the internal dynamics of the school. The "normal" staff are just as much prisoners as the students. And the anomalous teachers... they're not just a unified front. They're individual predators, all operating under the shadow of Alice, and the fear of Principal Grace.

Agent Sarah: So the fire drill evacuation plan is still our best bet?

Anya: It's even better now. It will get the innocent staff and students out, and it will keep the anomalous teachers isolated. They won't abandon their classrooms during a "breakdown of order." It's the perfect trap.

Kofia: And our psy-ops teams now have a much clearer psychological profile to work with. They can tailor their approach to each teacher's specific pathology.

Anya: *(She turns from the monitor to face Thorne directly.)* Agent Thorne, Kofia and I need to speak with her again.

Kofia: *(Nodding in agreement.)* There are things she didn't tell you. Things she might only tell the "janitors" she met. We built a different kind of rapport with her.

Agent Thorne: *(He considers them for a moment, his gaze analytical.)* What specifically are you after?

Anya: The Delta symbol. She was terrified to speak of it. And her own backstory, her connection to Alice and Oliver. She gave you the facts, but we need the context. The *why*.

Agent Thorne: *(He gives a slow, deliberate nod.)* Your assessment is sound. A different approach might yield a different layer of truth. Very well. You have twenty minutes. No more. I'll have CP2 prep the room.

(Thorne taps his comms unit.)

Agent Thorne: Sarah, Benedict. I'm sending Iota-10 in. Prep the door.

(Anya and Kofia walked out of the viewing room and stood before the interrogation room door. A soft buzz sounded, and the seamless panel hissed open. Principal Grace looked up from the table, her head turning to the left. Her eyes widened in shock as she saw the two familiar faces, now clad in the stark, authoritative attire of Foundation agents.)

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is a startled, dry rustle.)* You two! But... you were... the janitors! What is this? Who are you?

(Anya and Kofia entered, and the door slid shut. Kofia moved a chair to the table while Anya sat opposite Grace, her expression a mixture of sympathy and professional focus.)

Anya: *(Her voice was gentle yet firm.)* Principal Grace. My name is Agent Anya, and this is Agent Kofia. We are with the Foundation. We must apologize for the deception earlier, but it was necessary to understand the situation without causing a panic.

Kofia: *(He offered a reassuring nod as he sat down.)* We are here to help you, Principal. We meant what we said in the school. We helped Engel, and we want to help you.

Principal Grace: *(A flicker of recognition, of trust, in her eyes.)* Engel... Yes. He told me during the lunch break. He said you were very kind. He said you stood up to those boys for him.

Anya: He's a good kid. He's been through far too much. We're glad he's safe now. How are you holding up, Principal? Agent Thorne's questions... that was a heavy burden to unload.

Principal Grace: *(She looks down at her hands, then back at them.)* It was. But... it was a relief, too. To finally tell someone. Are you... are you really going to stop them?

Kofia: That is our mission. Which is why we need to ask you a few more things. About the bullies. Oliver, Zip, and Edward. You told Agent Thorne that Oliver's prank led Jenna and Liam to Alice. What is his connection to her?

Principal Grace: *(Her body stiffened instantly. Her gaze snapped down, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and recognition.)* That... that is a long and terrible story.

Anya: We have time. We need to understand everything, Principal. We need to understand the history.

Principal Grace: *(She takes a deep, shuddering breath.)* The history... is my failure. A long, slow failure that cost children their lives.

Kofia: *(His voice gentle.)* We're not here to place blame, Principal. We're here to understand. First, we owe you an apology. For the janitor act. We had to be sure, to see the school for ourselves without raising alarms.

Anya: Our methods were... unorthodox. But the threat level required it. We hope you can understand. We saw how you tried to manage things, how you confronted us when you thought we were a threat. You were protecting your school.

Principal Grace: *(Looking at them, a flicker of something other than fear in her eyes.)* Protecting it? I was presiding over a graveyard. Engel... you were kind to him. He's so fragile.

Kofia: He's a brave kid. He's been through more than anyone should. He told us about you, you know. He said you were one of the teachers he trusted.

Anya: He's safe now, Principal. We made sure of it. Are *you* alright? Truly? After everything you've told Agent Thorne, and now this... it's a heavy burden.

Principal Grace: *(A dry, humorless rustle.)* "Alright" is a luxury I haven't had in twenty years, Agent. But... talking about it... it feels... lighter. Less like a secret I have to die with.

Kofia: That's good. That's a start. We need to talk about the bullies. Oliver, Zip, and Edward. You told Agent Thorne that Oliver's prank led Jenna and Liam to Alice.

Anya: What is his connection to her? Why does he seem so... invested in the school's chaos? Engel said he was always talking about Alice, even before...

Principal Grace: *(Her body stiffens again, the old fear returning.)* Oliver... is the person I want to left him to pit. The mistake I made long ago. He and Alice... they were always like this when it was their first day.

Anya: What were they like, Grace?

Principal Grace: *(She hesitates, then the words come tumbling out, a torrent of confession.)* They were students. Or, they were supposed to be. University students, both of them, brilliant but... unstable. They had a darkness in them. There was an incident at their last placement... a student was hurt. Badly. It was covered up, but I knew. I was the one who had to sign off on their transfer. I brought them to Maple High. I thought I could... guide them. Control them.

Kofia: You thought you could fix them.

Principal Grace: *(A sob catches in her throat.)* I was arrogant. I saw their potential, but I ignored the danger. They were in a relationship, a volatile one. They fed each other's worst impulses. Oliver's cruelty, Alice's... detachment. I thought separating them would help. I reassigned Alice, moved her to a "special projects" role. It was a glorified isolation. I locked her away in that part of the school, the part that was already... wrong.

Anya: The blue door.

Principal Grace: *(Nodding, her form trembling.)* Yes. I took her away from him. And in doing so, I broke something. In her. In him. In the school itself. That's when she... changed. Became what she is now. And Oliver... he never forgave me. His pranks, his bullying... it's all for her. It's his way of lashing out, of trying to get back to her. He's been trying to break my control, my order, ever since.

(The confession hangs in the air, thick and heavy. Grace's body is wracked with silent sobs, the full weight of her twenty-year failure crashing down on her. She covers her face with her hands, her form shaking.)

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is a muffled, heartbroken wail.)* It's my fault. It's all my fault. I created this monster. I created all of this...

Kofia: *(He reaches across the table, his hand hovering for a moment before gently resting on her shoulder. His voice is soft, steady.)* Grace. Look at me. This is not all on you. You made a mistake, a terrible one, but you made it with the intention of protecting people. You've been fighting this war alone for two decades.

Anya: *(Her own voice is filled with a rare, genuine empathy.)* We're here now. You are not alone anymore. What you did... keeping those files, trying to maintain order... it gave us the intel we needed to stop this. You gave us the keys.

Principal Grace: *(She looks up, her face a mask of misery.)* But the children...

Kofia: The children we can still save, we will. And the ones we can't... we will get justice for them. You have our word. As a thank you for your courage, for finally telling us the truth, we are going to do everything in our power to end this nightmare.

(Grace stares at them, her sobbing slowly subsiding. The comfort, the validation after so many years of silent terror, is a powerful balm.)

Anya: We're done for now. We have what we need. You need to rest.

Kofia: We're going to leave you here for a little while longer. It's the safest place for you right now. We need you as an asset, to help us understand everything. We'll be back.

(Anya and Kofia stand. The wall buzzes softly and the door slides open. They turn to leave.)

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is quiet, but clear.)* Agents.

(They pause, turning back to her.)

Anya: Yes, Principal?

Principal Grace: Thank you.

(Anya gives a small, solemn nod. They step out, and the door hisses shut, leaving Grace alone in the quiet, white-grayish room. She looks down at the table, at the faint ring of condensation left by her untouched cup of tea. She slowly reaches for it, her hand no longer cuffed, and takes a sip. It's cold, but it's a start. The protection they offered, the future they promised... it was a fragile, terrifying, but beautiful thing.)

14:45 - Medical Command Post

(The interior of the Medical Command Post was a stark, sterile environment, humming with the low, constant thrum of advanced life-support systems. The air was cold and smelled faintly of ozone and antiseptic. In the center of the main lab stood three Bio-Revival Stasis units, their transparent canopies glowing with a soft, blue light. Inside each, suspended in a shimmering gel, were the fragmented remains of the three deceased students: Claire, Abbie, and Lana. Dr. Aris, the head medical researcher, stood before the central unit, his eyes fixed on the holographic data scrolling beside it. Dr. Sylvia Sharma, the forensic pathologist, and Nurse Kaito, the BRS specialist, stood nearby, their expressions grim and focused. The door hissed open, and Dr. Julian Croft, the lead psychologist, entered, holding a datapad, followed by Dr. Samuel Jin, the trauma specialist, Dr. Li Chen, and Dr. Mei Li.)

Dr. Aris: Julian, Samuel. Good on you for joining us. I trust you've reviewed the preliminary reports?

Dr. Croft: I have, Aris. And frankly, I'm not sure if I'm reading a medical report or a theoretical physics paper. How are you all holding up?

Dr. Sharma: We're managing, Doctor. It's... a challenging case.

Nurse Kaito: That's one word for it. I've had to re-calibrate the BRS units twelve times in the last hour. The system's fighting itself.

Dr. Aris: Status update on the BRS units, Kaito. Any change in cellular degradation?

Nurse Kaito: Negative, Doctor. Degradation is holding at 0.02% per hour. The stasis fields are stable. We're preserving what's left of them, but that's all we're doing. We're

not making any headway on reconstruction. The cellular regeneration matrix is failing to initialize.

Dr. Sharma: *(She gestures to a large monitor displaying autopsy photos.)* Let's start with Subject Claire.

Dr. Aris: What's your assessment, Sylvia?

Dr. Sharma: Complete dismemberment. Transection of the torso, both upper and lower extremities. The cuts are... unnervingly clean. Almost surgical.

Dr. Chen: That's not a knife. Not a scalpel. The precision is too high, even for a machine. There's no tearing, no microscopic fraying at the edges of the tissue. It's like the molecular bonds were just... severed.

Dr. Aris: What kind of weapon could do that?

Dr. Sharma: I don't know. But the initial reports from the field mentioned a math teacher, Miss Circle, who uses a compass. A sharp, pointed instrument. If it's anomalously sharp...

Dr. Croft: It fits the psychology. A math teacher, obsessed with precision, with lines and angles. A student who "fails" is imperfect, and the imperfection is... removed. Divided.

Dr. Jin: It's a complete depersonalization of the victim. They're not a person; they're a problem to be solved. A geometric equation.

Dr. Aris: A horrifying but plausible theory. What about the others?

Dr. Sharma: Subject Abbie is... a biological nightmare. Severe trauma to the cranium and thorax, with the skeletal structure of the ribcage fully exposed. The cranium is fractured, with what appears to be brain matter extruded. Possibly someone ate or mauled him

Dr. Mei Li: We've analyzed it. It's a saliva, and this is our piece of the evidence. I am preparing a sample and will prepare for an experiment on who owns this DNA. Nurse Kaito, do you think Abbie can be recovered with this... mess?.

Nurse Kaito: That's what's fighting the BRS. Her own body is trying to turn into something else.

Dr. Aris: And Lana?

Dr. Sharma: *(She brings up a new set of images. The room falls silent.)* Subject Lana's cause of death appears to be multiple puncture wounds to the cranium and torso. We've identified wood and graphite fragments consistent with pencils being driven into her body with extreme force.

Dr. Chen: A brutal, straightforward assault, then.

Dr. Sharma: That's the contradiction. The tissue damage around the wounds isn't consistent with simple piercing trauma. There's no tearing. The cells are... folded. Creased. As if the pencils didn't pierce the flesh, but pushed it into another dimension and back again.

Dr. Aris: It means the damage isn't just biological. It's conceptual. The very idea of her physical form has been attacked. The pencils are just a symptom, a physical manifestation of a reality-bending assault.

Dr. Croft: So the attacker didn't just want to kill her. It wanted to unmake her. To turn her into something... wrong. That speaks to a psychology of absolute control, of remaking the world to fit a specific, twisted vision.

Dr. Jin: The physical trauma alone is catastrophic. But to have your very form conceptually altered... if we do manage to revive her, the psychological shock could be instantly fatal. Her mind wouldn't be able to process the discrepancy between what she was and what she has become.

Dr. Croft: We would need to have a team of our best memetic therapists on standby the moment she regains consciousness. Assuming "consciousness" is even the right term for what she might experience.

Dr. Aris: One step at a time, Julian. We need more data. I want a full spectral analysis of the foreign agent on Subject Abbie. And Sylvia, I want you to run a comparative analysis of the cellular damage on all three subjects. Find a common thread, a signature, anything that links them together.

Dr. Sharma: I'll start immediately, Doctor. But what if there is no link? What if these are three completely separate anomalous events?

Dr. Aris: Then we have a much bigger problem than we thought. But I don't believe in coincidences, not on this scale. There is a connection. We just haven't found it yet.

Nurse Kaito: And the revival process? Do we continue?

Dr. Aris: We continue. We maintain the stasis fields and we keep working. We owe it to them. We owe it to their families.

Nurse Kaito: Understood, Doctor. I'll begin running diagnostics on the bio-printers. If we're going to attempt cellular reconstruction on Subject Claire, we'll need to fabricate tissue scaffolds from scratch. The originals are too conceptually damaged to use as a template.

Dr. Chen: Scaffolds won't be enough for Abbie. That substance... Probably someone's saliva, I'm betting that someone Mauled him.

Dr. Mei Li: We are experimenting with Saliva DNA. I'm running simulations for a targeted retroviral agent, but the anomaly's properties are shifting. It's adapting to our analysis.

Dr. Aris: It's learning. A defensive measure. Focus on isolating a stable sample, Mei. We can't fight what we can't define.

Dr. Sharma: And Lana... the sheer brutality of it. The precision is what's unsettling. It's not the work of a frenzied killer. It's the work of an artist. A deeply disturbed, malevolent artist.

Dr. Croft: Or a mathematician. Someone who sees a person as an equation to be solved. The psychology behind these attacks is as varied as the methods. We're dealing with a spectrum of psychoses, not a single entity.

Dr. Jin: Which means the survivors will have a spectrum of trauma. Engel witnessed the aftermath. The other students... they've been living in a state of constant, low-level terror for months. Hyper-vigilance, anxiety, survivor's guilt... we're going to need a comprehensive, long-term care plan for every single person we pull out of there.

Dr. Croft: Agreed. We'll need to establish a secure, off-site facility for them. Something that doesn't feel like a Foundation site. Something that feels... safe. A place to decompress before we even begin to address the trauma.

Dr. Aris: We're getting ahead of ourselves. We have to save them before we can treat them. Kaito, what's the power draw on the BRS units?

Nurse Kaito: Stable, but high. We can maintain them indefinitely, but if we try to initiate a full-scale regeneration cycle on all three simultaneously, we'll need to divert power from the main camp's secondary systems.

Dr. Chen: Which means no hot coffee for the command staff. A small price to pay.

Dr. Sharma: I'll take cold coffee and a successful revival any day. I'm going to start cross-referencing the puncture wounds on Lana with the design of a standard school compass. See if I can find a mathematical correlation in the wound patterns.

Dr. Mei Li: And I'll continue my work on the retrovirus. If I can synthesize a phage that can target the informational agent in Abbie without causing total cellular collapse... it's a long shot, but it's the only one we've got.

Dr. Jin: Julian, let's start drafting that post-extraction psychological protocol. We'll need to have it ready the moment the first student is evacuated.

Dr. Croft: Agreed. We'll need to account for every possibility, from catatonia to acute hysteria.

Dr. Aris: Good. We have our assignments. We have our mission. The work is grim, the odds are long, but we are the line. We hold it. Now, let's get to work.

(The team dispersed, the low hum of the BRS units a constant, somber reminder of the lives they were fighting to restore. The work was grim, the odds were long, but in the cold, sterile heart of the Medical Command Post, it was the only work that mattered.)

15:10 - Medical Command Post

(The team in the medical lab worked with a grim, focused intensity. The low hum of the BRS units was the only constant sound, a somber backdrop to their quiet, professional exchanges. Dr. Croft and Dr. Jin were reviewing the preliminary psychological profiles of the known survivors when Dr. Croft's comms unit chirped.)

Dr. Croft: *(Tapping his earpiece.)* Croft here.

Agent Thorne (Comms): Julian, it's Thorne. I've concluded my initial interview with Principal Grace. She's... cooperative. But fragile.

Dr. Croft: That's to be expected. What do you need from us, Thorne?

Agent Thorne (Comms): I need you and Dr. Jin to report to the interrogation room at Command Post 2. You are to escort her here, to the medical bay. She needs a full psychological and physiological evaluation.

Dr. Jin: *(Looking over at Croft, his expression serious.)* We're on our way. Is she a security risk?

Agent Thorne (Comms): Negative. She's a victim. Treat her as such. Thorne out.

Dr. Croft: *(To Jin.)* Well, you heard the man. Our new patient awaits.

Dr. Jin: Twenty years in that place... I can't even begin to imagine the state of her mind.

Dr. Croft: We're about to find out. Let's go. We'll take the direct access corridor. It'll be quicker.

Dr. Jin: Right behind you. Let's see what we're dealing with.

Meanwhile, in the Interrogation Room

(Principal Grace sat in the silent, white-grayish room, the untouched cup of cold tea a silent testament to the storm of emotions she had just weathered. The sudden, soft buzz of the door sliding open made her flinch. It wasn't Agent Thorne this time. It was one of the other agents she had seen in the observation room, a man with a calm, professional demeanor.)

Agent Benedict: Principal Grace. My name is Agent Benedict. I'm here to remove your restraints.

(He approached her slowly, a small, key-like device in his hand. Grace watched him, her fear replaced by a weary resignation.)

Principal Grace: What... what's happening now?

Agent Benedict: You're being moved to our medical facility for a full evaluation. Dr. Croft and Dr. Jin will be here shortly to escort you.

(He unlocked the cuff on her other wrist, the metal falling away with a soft click. Grace rubbed her wrists, the feeling of freedom a strange, alien sensation.)

Principal Grace: Medical facility? Am I... am I hurt?

Agent Benedict: It's a precautionary measure, Ma'am. You've been through a significant ordeal. We need to ensure your well-being.

Principal Grace: *(She looked down at her hands, then back at him.)* You're all so... polite. I was expecting... something else.

Agent Benedict: We're professionals, Ma'am. Our mission is to protect, not to punish.

(Just then, the door slid open again, and Dr. Croft and Dr. Jin entered.)

Dr. Croft: Principal Grace? I'm Dr. Julian Croft, and this is my colleague, Dr. Samuel Jin. We're here to take you to the medical bay.

Principal Grace: *(She looked from one to the other, her expression a mixture of apprehension and exhaustion.)* More doctors. Of course.

Dr. Jin: We're here to help, Principal. We understand you've been through an incredibly traumatic experience. Our goal is to make sure you're alright.

Dr. Croft: We'll be as brief as we can, but a full evaluation is necessary. For your own safety.

Principal Grace: *(She nodded slowly, a flicker of her old authority returning.)* I understand. Lead the way, Doctors.

(Dr. Croft and Dr. Jin escorted Grace out of the interrogation room and through the quiet, efficient corridors of the command post. The transition from the sterile white of the interrogation room to the bustling, yet controlled, environment of the medical bay was jarring. Grace's eyes darted around, taking in the advanced equipment, the focused personnel, the sheer scale of the operation.)

(They led her to a small, private medical bay, a quiet alcove separated from the main lab by a translucent screen. It was clean, comfortable, and a world away from the cold, intimidating interrogation room.)

Dr. Jin: *(He gestured to the comfortable examination bed.)* Please, have a seat. We'll start with a simple physical check-up.

Dr. Croft: I'll be right here with you, Principal. Just to talk.

Dr. Jin: *(He gave Croft a knowing look.)* This is your field, Julian. I'll handle the physical assessment, but the real work... that's on you.

Dr. Croft: *(He nodded, his focus entirely on Grace.)* I understand.

(Dr. Jin began his work, his movements gentle and professional. Dr. Croft pulled up a chair, his posture relaxed, his expression open and empathetic.)

Dr. Croft: Principal Grace. I know you've already been through a lot today. And I know you're tired. But I need to ask you a few questions. Just to get a baseline understanding of how you're feeling. Is that alright?

Principal Grace: *(She looked at him, her gaze surprisingly steady.)* I... yes. I suppose so.

Dr. Croft: Good. My name is Julian Croft. I'm a psychologist. My job is to help people who have been through... difficult situations. And I think it's safe to say you qualify.

Principal Grace: *(A dry, humorless rustle.)* "Difficult" is one word for it.

Dr. Croft: *(A small, sad smile.)* Indeed. I want you to know that this is a safe space. Anything you say to me is confidential. My only goal is to help you process what you've been through.

Principal Grace: *(She looked down at her hands.)* I don't even know where to begin.

Dr. Croft: Let's start with today. Before my colleagues... intervened. How were you feeling this morning?

Principal Grace: *(She took a deep breath, the memory still fresh.)* The same as every morning. Terrified. I woke up, I put on my uniform, and I went to war. A war I knew I was losing.

Dr. Croft: And when you saw Agents Anya and Kofia... what was your first thought?

Principal Grace: That they were a new variable. A new threat. I thought they were there to expose me, to bring the whole thing crashing down. I never... I never imagined they were there to help.

Dr. Croft: It's understandable. You've been alone in this for a very long time. It's hard to trust anyone.

Principal Grace: *(She looked at him, her eyes filled with a deep, ancient sorrow.)* Trust? Trust is a luxury I couldn't afford. It was a weakness. It got my predecessor killed.

Dr. Croft: Tell me about him.

Principal Grace: He was a good man. A kind man. And he was weak. He tried to fight them with reason, with compassion. And they... they erased him. I learned from his mistake. I became the opposite of him. I became... a tyrant.

Dr. Croft: You did what you thought you had to do to survive. To protect the children.

Principal Grace: *(A single tear rolled down her cheek.)* But I didn't protect them, did I? I just... managed the casualties.

Dr. Croft: You kept a record. You preserved the truth. That is a form of protection. A very brave one. Now, let's talk about that truth. But before we do, I want to ask you something. After everything you've endured, what is it that you want, Grace? If we succeed, if we make this place safe... what is the one thing you want to see happen?

Principal Grace: *(She seems taken aback by the question, as if no one has asked her what she wanted in decades. She thinks for a long moment.)* I... I want the children to be safe. I want them to be able to go to school without being afraid. I want... I want them to have a normal life. A life I couldn't give them.

Dr. Croft: That is our goal as well. And we will do everything in our power to make that happen. Your cooperation is the most critical part of that. You've given us a chance to finally end this.

Principal Grace: *(She nods, a flicker of resolve in her eyes.)* I will help. In any way I can.

Dr. Croft: Thank you, Grace. Now, you mentioned becoming a tyrant to avoid your predecessor's fate. Can you tell me more about that? How did that change you?

Principal Grace: *(She looks away, the memory painful.)* It... it broke me. I had to become something I hated. I had to be cold, distant. I had to make them fear me more than they feared the teachers. I had to become... a monster. And in doing so, I lost a part of myself. I forgot what it was like to be... human.

Dr. Jin: *(He pauses his examination, his voice gentle.)* Her heart rate is elevated, Julian. She's reliving it.

Dr. Croft: *(He gives a small, reassuring nod.)* It's alright, Grace. You're not there anymore. You're here. You're safe. Let's just talk about it. We're not judging you. We're trying to understand the weight you've been carrying.

Principal Grace: *(She takes a shaky breath.)* The weight... it was constant. Every day, a new calculation. A new risk assessment. Who was vulnerable? Who was showing signs of "failure"? I had to intervene, to pull them from classes, to make up excuses. I became a master of lies. All to keep them from the teachers' notice.

Dr. Croft: You were playing a constant, high-stakes game of chess, with children's lives as the pieces.

Principal Grace: *(A bitter, self-deprecating laugh.)* And I was a terrible player. I lost so many. So many...

Dr. Croft: You saved many more. The ones who graduated, the ones who went on to live their lives... they are a testament to your efforts. You held the line, Grace. For twenty years. No one could ask for more.

Principal Grace: *(She looks at him, a glimmer of something other than pain in her eyes. Gratitude. Understanding.)* I... I never thought of it that way.

Dr. Croft: It's the truth. Now, let's talk about the school's environment. The "normal" teachers. How did they not see what was happening?

Principal Grace: They were... willfully blind. They saw the strict rules, the quiet, fearful students, and they saw... order. They saw a well-run school. They didn't want to look deeper. It was easier to pretend that everything was fine.

Dr. Croft: A coping mechanism. Denial is a powerful tool.

Principal Grace: It is. But it is a tool that costs lives.

Dr. Croft: Indeed. Now, let's talk about Oliver. You said he never forgave you for separating him from Alice. Tell me about that day. The day you made that decision.

(Grace stares at him for a long moment, her eyes unfocused. The low hum of the medical bay fades away, replaced by the memory of her own office, years ago. The air is thick with tension.)

Flashback: The Principal's Office - Years Ago

(The office is spacious, dominated by a large, imposing oak desk. Sunlight streams through the tall windows, illuminating dust motes dancing in the air. It's a picture of academic authority, but the atmosphere is thick with a palpable, suffocating tension. A younger, sterner Principal Grace stands behind her desk, her hands clasped behind her back. Seated before her are two university students, Alice and Oliver. Alice is the picture of calm, almost serene detachment, her gaze fixed on a point just past Grace's shoulder. Oliver, however, is a coiled spring of aggression, his knuckles white where his hands are clenched into fists in his lap.)

Principal Grace: I've reviewed the reports from your last placement. The incident with the student in the art room. It was... unacceptable.

Oliver: *(His voice is a low snarl.)* It was an accident. The kid was clumsy. He shouldn't have been messing with the clay extruder.

Principal Grace: He has third-degree burns, Oliver. Third-degree. And you were the supervising teacher. Your response was to lock him in the supply closet "to think about his mistake."

Oliver: He needed to learn. Pain is a memorable teacher.

Principal Grace: That is not a pedagogical philosophy we endorse at this institution. That is sadism.

Alice: *(Her voice is soft, melodic, yet utterly devoid of emotion.)* The student failed to follow the proper safety protocols. He was given clear instructions. He chose to deviate. Failure has consequences.

Principal Grace: *(Her gaze snaps to Alice.)* And your response, Alice, was to do nothing. You simply watched. That is also unacceptable. You had a duty of care.

Alice: My duty is to the lesson. The lesson was about cause and effect. The student provided a perfect demonstration.

Principal Grace: He is a child, not a lab rat in your experiment. The two of you... together... you are a liability. Your methods are too extreme, your philosophies too... aligned.

Oliver: So what are you going to do? Fire us? We're the best teachers this place has seen in years. The students are learning. They're disciplined. Test scores are up.

Principal Grace: Your results are not in question. Your methods are. I've spoken with the other teachers. Mr. Demi is concerned about the... intensity of your music theory drills. Miss Sasha says you've monopolized the art supplies for your own... projects.

Oliver: Demi is soft. Sasha is a hack. They don't understand our vision.

Alice: They cling to outdated models of education. They coddle failure. We cultivate success.

Principal Grace: You cultivate fear. The students are terrified of you.

Oliver: Good. Fear is a motivator. It weeds out the weak.

Principal Grace: This is a school, Oliver, not a gladiatorial arena. I will not have my students subjected to your social Darwinist experiments.

Alice: All systems are experiments, Principal. Society is the grandest one of all. We are simply preparing the students for the reality of it.

Principal Grace: I am the reality of this school. And I am telling you that this partnership is over.

Oliver: What are you talking about?

Principal Grace: I'm not going to fire you. I am going to separate you. Effective immediately, Alice, you are reassigned. You will no longer be teaching. You will be in charge of "special projects."

Alice: *(A flicker of something... interest? ...in her eyes.)* Special projects?

Principal Grace: Archival work. Curriculum development. I have an office for you, on the second floor. You will work there, alone.

Oliver: *(He stands up, his chair scraping loudly against the floor.)* You can't do that! We work together! We're a team!

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is cold, absolute.)* I can. And I have. Your "team" is a danger to my students. You enable each other's worst impulses.

Oliver: She makes me a better teacher!

Principal Grace: She makes you a crueler one. And you, Alice... he gives your cold philosophy a weapon. It stops now.

Alice: *(She remains seated, perfectly calm.)* And what of Oliver?

Principal Grace: He will continue to teach. But he will do so under the direct supervision of myself and the other senior staff. His lesson plans will be reviewed. His methods will be monitored. He will learn to teach our way.

Oliver: This is ridiculous! You're punishing us for being effective!

Principal Grace: I am protecting my students from you. My decision is final. You will both learn to work within my rules, or you will not work here at all. Now, get out of my office.

Oliver: *(He takes a step towards the desk, his body radiating menace.)* You will regret this.

Principal Grace: *(She doesn't flinch, her gaze like ice.)* Is that a threat, Mr. Oliver?

Alice: *(Her voice cuts through the tension, calm and sharp.)* Oliver. That's enough.

(Oliver freezes, turning to look at her. She gives a small, almost imperceptible shake of her head. He clenches his jaw, his anger still burning, but he takes a step back.)

Alice: *(She stands, smoothing her dress. She looks at Grace, and for the first time, there is a hint of something other than detachment in her eyes. It looks like... pity.)* You believe you can control the outcome by changing the variables. It's a common fallacy. You are not creating order, Principal. You are merely creating a new equation.

Principal Grace: I am creating a safe environment for my students. That is my only equation.

Alice: *(A slow, cold smile that doesn't reach her eyes.)* We shall see.

(She turns and walks towards the door. Oliver, after a moment of tense silence, follows her, his parting glance a promise of future retribution. The door clicks shut, leaving Grace alone in the sudden, heavy silence of her office. She sinks into her chair, the adrenaline leaving her feeling shaky and cold. She had won the battle, but she had a terrible, sinking feeling that she had just started a war.)

Flashback: The Hallway - A Week Later

(The school hallway is buzzing with the normal, chaotic energy of students changing classes. Lockers slam shut, friends laugh, and teachers try to maintain a semblance of order. The new, stricter rules implemented by Principal Grace have created an undercurrent of tension, but on the surface, it is a typical school day. Suddenly, a flicker. The overhead lights buzz erratically, and a low hum fills the air. The chatter dies down as students and teachers look around in confusion.)

Mr. Demi: *(Stepping out of his music room.)* What's going on with the lights?

Miss Sasha: *(From her art room doorway.)* I don't know. It feels... strange.

Student (Sammy): Did you feel that? The air feels weird.

Student (Clara): Yeah, like... static.

(At the far end of the hall, a door opens. It is the door to Alice's "special projects" office. She steps out, and the hallway falls silent. She is... different. The air around her shimmers, distorting the lockers and the floor tiles into impossible, wavering shapes. Her eyes, once a calm, detached blue, now glow with a cold, internal light.)

Student (Finn): Whoa... what's wrong with Miss Alice?

Student (Leo): She looks... scary.

Student (Mia): I'm scared.

Miss Emily: *(Stepping forward, her voice cautious.)* Alice? Are you alright?

Alice: *(Her voice is a discordant symphony, multiple voices speaking at once, echoing unnaturally in the confined space.)* **"Alright"? I am... an equation. And the variable has been changed.**

(Grace rushes into the hallway, her best friend, a kind-faced history teacher named Ms. Evelyn Elsher, right behind her.)

Grace: Alice! Stop this! This is not acceptable behavior!

Evelyn: *(Placing a hand on Grace's arm.)* Grace, don't! There's something wrong with her!

Grace: I am the Principal of this school! I will not have this chaos in my hallways!

Alice: **You are a variable. A temporary solution. You are not the constant.**

Evelyn: What is she talking about?

Mr. Demi: This is not normal. We need to get the students out of here!

Miss Sasha: Everyone, back in the classrooms! Now!

Student (Gus): The door won't open!

Student (Holly): We're trapped!

Student (Ivy): I want to go home!

Student (Jake): What is she doing?

(Alice raises a hand, and a wave of shimmering energy erupts from her, sending a shockwave down the hall. Students and teachers are thrown back. Grace manages to stay on her feet, but Evelyn is knocked to the ground.)

Grace: Evelyn!

(Before Grace can move, Alice is there, standing over the fallen teacher. The air grows cold, and the screams die down to terrified whimpers.)

Evelyn: *(Looking up at Alice, her face pale with terror.)* Alice... please...

Alice: **You are a variable. An unnecessary complication. You must be... erased.**

(Alice reaches down, and Evelyn lets out a single, piercing scream that is abruptly cut short. There is a sickening crunch, a sound of breaking bone and tearing flesh. Where Evelyn had been, there is now only a mangled, bloody heap, her body twisted into an impossible shape.)

(The hallway is silent, save for the terrified sobs of the students. Oliver appears at the end of the hall, a look of awe and adoration on his face.)

Oliver: Alice... you're... beautiful.

Alice: *(She turns to him, the blue light in her eyes softening slightly.)* **They tried to separate us. They failed.**

Oliver: They'll never do it again. I promise.

Alice: *(She looks around at the terrified students and staff, her voice a cold, clear threat that echoes through the silent hall.)* **This is my school now. My rules. Anyone who speaks of this, anyone who dares to report what they have seen... will be erased. Is that understood?**

(A collective, terrified whimper is her only answer. She takes Oliver's hand, and they walk away, down the shimmering, distorted hallway, leaving a trail of terror in their wake.)

(Grace stands frozen for a moment, her mind unable to process what she has just seen. Then, a strangled cry escapes her, and she rushes to the broken body of her friend. She falls to her knees, her hands hovering over the bloody mess, her body wracked with a grief so profound it is a physical force.)

Grace: *(A raw, animalistic scream of pure agony tears from her throat, echoing through the silent, terrified school.)* EVELYN! NO!

(She collapses over her friend's body, her body shaking with uncontrollable sobs. The students and staff can only watch, their faces a mixture of horror and pity, as their once-unflappable principal breaks down completely, her world, and the fragile order of their school, shattered in an instant.)

Present Day: The Medical Bay

(Grace flinches violently, the memory as vivid as if it had just happened. She is back in the medical bay, her breathing shallow, her form trembling. A single, silent tear traces a path down her cheek.)

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is a horrified whisper.)* I... I saw it. I saw her... unmake my best friend. And I... I did nothing. I just... watched.

Dr. Croft: *(His voice is a gentle anchor, pulling her back to the present.)* You were in shock, Grace. You were a victim, just like everyone else in that hallway. There was nothing you could have done.

Principal Grace: But I should have! I was the principal! I was supposed to protect them! And I... I just... broke. I ran. I ran back to my office and I locked the door. I hid. While my students and my staff... they were left out there with... with that thing.

Dr. Jin: *(He places a gentle hand on her shoulder.)* Grace. You need to breathe. You're safe now. That was a long time ago. Your reaction was human. It was a survival instinct.

Principal Grace: *(She shakes her head, a fresh wave of sobs wracking her body.)* Evelyn didn't survive. She was my friend. She was the only one who knew... who suspected something was wrong. She was trying to help me. And I let her die.

Dr. Croft: He's right, Grace. You've been carrying that memory, that guilt, for years. It's time to let it go. We are here now. We will handle them. You don't have to fight this war alone anymore.

Principal Grace: *(She looks from Croft to Jin, her eyes filled with a profound, weary gratitude. The simple act of sharing her oldest, most painful secret, and not being met with condemnation, but with understanding, is a powerful, disarming experience.)* The pain... it's never gone away. Every time I close my eyes... I see her. I see... what's left of her.

Dr. Croft: That's a symptom of severe trauma. It's called a flashback. It's your mind's way of trying to process an event that was too horrific to comprehend.

Dr. Jin: We can help with that, Grace. There are therapies, treatments. We can help you manage the pain.

Principal Grace: *(She takes a shaky breath, trying to compose herself.)* I... I don't know if I can ever be fixed.

Dr. Croft: We're not here to "fix" you, Grace. We're here to help you heal. And the first step is understanding. Now, let's talk about Oliver's current activities. The bullying. It's more than just simple cruelty, isn't it? It's a performance. A message.

Principal Grace: *(She nods, wiping a tear from her cheek.)* Yes. It's all for her. For Alice. He's trying to get her attention. He's trying to show her that he's still on her side. That he's still... the same.

Dr. Croft: So the bullying isn't the goal. It's the means to an end.

Principal Grace: Exactly. He targets the students who are... different. The ones who are creative, the ones who are a little strange. The ones Alice might find... interesting. He's... he's curating an audience for her.

Dr. Jin: He's a procurer. He's finding her new victims.

Principal Grace: *(She shudders.)* I... I suppose so. I never thought of it that way. I just saw it as... chaos. As him trying to undermine my authority.

Dr. Croft: It's both. He's undermining your authority to create an environment where Alice can thrive. An environment of fear and chaos. It's a love letter, written in the language of terror.

Principal Grace: *(Her voice is filled with a new, cold anger.)* He's using those children. He's putting them in danger. For her.

Dr. Croft: Yes. And that's why we need to stop him. We need to understand his psychology, his motivations. What is his relationship with Zip and Edward? Are they true believers, or just... followers?

Principal Grace: Followers. They're weak, impressionable boys. Oliver is the charismatic one. The leader. They do what he says because they're afraid of him. And because he makes them feel powerful.

Dr. Jin: A classic cult dynamic. The charismatic leader and his devoted, fearful followers.

Dr. Croft: It's a pattern we've seen before. It makes Oliver the primary psychological target. If we can break his influence, Zip and Edward will likely crumble.

Principal Grace: But how? He's... he's devoted to her. He would do anything for her.

Dr. Croft: That's his weakness. His devotion is a lever we can use. We just need to find the right fulcrum. Thank you, Grace. This has been... incredibly helpful. You've given us a new, critical perspective on the situation.

Principal Grace: *(She looks at him, a flicker of her old self returning.)* I... I'm glad. I want to help. I want this to end.

Dr. Croft: It will. We promise. Now, I think that's enough for today. You've been through a lot. You need to rest.

Dr. Jin: I've completed my initial assessment. Physically, you're exhausted, but stable. We'll get you some food, some water. And a comfortable place to sleep.

Principal Grace: *(She looks around the medical bay, at the glowing BRS units, at the quiet, focused personnel.)* I... I don't know if I can sleep. Not after... all of this.

Dr. Croft: We can provide a mild sedative, if you'd like. Something to help you rest without dreams.

Principal Grace: *(She considers it for a moment, then nods.)* Yes. Please. No dreams. I... I can't see her again. Not tonight.

Dr. Croft: Of course. We'll take care of you, Grace. You're not alone anymore. Remember that.

(While Principal Grace's harrowing therapy session with Dr. Croft and Dr. Jin continued in the sterile confines of the Medical Command Post, the fragile, enforced normalcy of the school day ticked onward. The students, still unsettled from the morning's blackout, went through the motions, their thin forms rustling through the quiet, unnerving halls. For the staff who knew something was wrong, every passing minute was a new exercise in quiet terror. For the students, it was just another strange, confusing day at Maple High.)

15:40 - An Off-Key Afternoon

(The music room was a pocket of determined cheerfulness in the otherwise tense school. Colorful posters of musical notes with cartoon faces adorned the walls, and a collection of recorders, xylophones, and small hand drums were distributed among the students. Miss Harmony stood at the front, a bright, genuine smile on her face as she tapped a rhythm on a tambourine. She was filling in for Mr. Demi, who, according to the official school announcement, was attending an "off-site music educators' conference." The students knew this was unusual, but in a school like Maple High, "unusual" was the baseline.)

Miss Harmony: *(She claps her hands lightly, the sound a gentle counterpoint to the lingering tension from the lunch period.)* Alright, everyone! From the top, one more time. Let's really try to feel the music this time. Remember what Mr. Demi always says: "Music isn't just notes, it's a feeling!" Let's try to make it a happy feeling, okay? One, two, three!

Ruby: *(She blows a sharp, piercingly off-key note on her recorder, then giggles, covering her mouth.)* Oops.

Skell: *(He groans dramatically from the back row, slumping over his xylophone.)* My ears! Ruby, my ears are bleeding!

Miss Harmony: *(Her smile doesn't falter, though her eyes show a hint of strain.)* Now, now, Skell. Be nice. It was a very... enthusiastic note, Ruby. Let's try for a little less enthusiasm and a little more control this time, okay?

Lizzy: Miss Harmony, where is Mr. Demi, really? He never misses a class.

Kevin: Yeah, and there's no such thing as the "Tri-County Accordion Festival." I looked it up during free time.

Petunia: My dad said sometimes people just need a day off. Maybe he's just tired.

Robby: Or maybe he got tired of hearing Skell complain about his ears bleeding all the time.

Skell: Hey! It's a valid medical concern! I'm a sensitive artist!

Riley: You're a sensitive something, that's for sure. Did you see those guys out front earlier? With the big tarps?

Cubbie: Yeah! They covered all the windows! My dad does construction, and he says they only do that when there's a big problem. Like a gas leak.

Ruby: A gas leak? We just had a blackout! Is the whole school falling apart?

Miss Harmony: *(She claps her hands again, a little more firmly this time.)* Everyone, let's focus. The school is perfectly fine. Principal Grace said it was just routine maintenance. And Mr. Demi is perfectly fine, too. He just needed to attend a conference. Now, the song. From the top. And Skell, I'm sure your ears will survive.

Kevin: I heard from a kid in Miss Emily's class that the blackout was because a giant squirrel chewed through the main power line.

Lizzy: A giant squirrel? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. It was probably just old wiring. This school is ancient.

Riley: My grandpa's older than this school, and his wiring is fine. Most of the time.

Petunia: Did anyone else feel that weird hum? Right before the lights went out? It felt like my teeth were buzzing.

Ruby: Ooh! Me too! It tickled!

Skell: I didn't feel a hum. I was too busy enjoying my tater tots. They were extra crispy today. Chef Anna is a genius.

Miss Harmony: *(She lets out a soft, patient sigh, her smile still in place.)* Okay, how about this? We'll play the song one more time, and if we can get through it without any bleeding ears or talk of giant squirrels, I'll let you all have five minutes of free play with the instruments. Deal?

Kevin: Deal! Can I use the big rain stick?

Lizzy: No fair! I wanted the rain stick!

Robby: I call the triangle! It's the most important instrument!

Skell: Actually, the xylophone is the most musically complex and emotionally resonant instrument in this room. It requires a delicate touch and a profound understanding of...

Riley: Just hit the colored bars with the stick, Skell. It's not that deep.

Cubbie: Yeah, you're not exactly a virtuoso. You played "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in three different keys yesterday. On accident.

Petunia: I thought it was artistic expression.

Robby: I thought it was a cry for help.

Kevin: So, are we going to play or are we going to talk about Skell's musical genius all day?

Lizzy: I'd rather talk about the giant squirrel. It's more interesting.

Riley: I wonder if it was a paper squirrel. Like us.

Ruby: A giant, paper squirrel that eats electrical wires. I like it. It's got potential.

Cubbie: Maybe it was friends with the monster behind the blue door!

Miss Harmony: *(Her smile finally falters, a flicker of genuine fear in her eyes before she quickly masks it.)* Okay! That's enough. No more talk of squirrels or doors. Music. Now. From the top. One, two, three...

Kevin: *(He tries to play his recorder with his nose, producing a sad, breathy squeal.)*

Lizzy: *(She giggles, pointing.)* Kevin! That's so gross!

Skell: *(He dramatically throws his xylophone mallets onto the floor.)* I can't work under these conditions! This is an assault on the very concept of melody! He's playing with his nose!

Miss Harmony: *(She pinches the bridge of her nose for a brief second before forcing her smile back into place.)* Kevin, please use your mouth. That's what it's for. Skell, please pick up your mallets. We're all trying our best.

Robby: *(He taps his triangle with perfect rhythm, looking smug.)* Some of us are trying better than others.

Petunia: *(Whispering to Ruby.)* Did you see Miss Circle in the hall during lunch? She was just... staring at the wall.

Ruby: *(Whispering back.)* I saw her! It was creepy. She didn't even blink. I wonder what she was looking at.

Cubbie: Maybe she was counting the bricks. Engel told me she really, really likes numbers.

Riley: She probably just likes staring. It's her hobby. Like how Skell's hobby is complaining.

Skell: It's not complaining! It's called artistic feedback! You wouldn't understand, you probably think a triangle is a real instrument.

Robby: Hey! The triangle is the heart of the orchestra! It provides the... the shimmering highlights!

Kevin: *(Now playing his recorder correctly.)* He's got a point. A song without a triangle is like a peanut butter sandwich without the jelly. It's just... sad.

Lizzy: Now I want a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Miss Harmony: *(She claps a simple rhythm.)* Let's stay on topic, please. The topic is music. Not sandwiches. Let's try again, from the chorus this time.

Petunia: I can't focus. The blackout was weird. And now Mr. Demi is gone. And Principal Grace wasn't in her office this morning.

Robby: How do you know? Were you snooping?

Petunia: No! I had to drop off the attendance sheet, and the door was locked. It's never locked.

Cubbie: Maybe she's at the accordion festival with Mr. Demi.

Riley: Maybe they ran away together to escape Kevin's nose-flute solos.

Kevin: It's a developing art form! You're all just jealous of my pioneering spirit!

Miss Harmony: *(Her voice is starting to sound a little desperate.)* Five minutes of free play, remember? The rain stick is calling your name, Ben—I mean, Kevin. Let's just get through this one song. Please? For me?

Ruby: *(She plays a few correct notes, then stops.)* It just feels weird to play happy songs right now. After... you know.

Lizzy: Yeah. Engel hasn't smiled for real all day. Except when he was talking to those new janitors.

Skell: The new janitors are weird. They're too... observant. The lady janitor looks like she's calculating the structural weaknesses of the building.

Riley: You're just mad because she didn't appreciate your artistic feedback about the floor smudges.

Petunia: I think they're nice. They smiled at me.

Robby: The man janitor looks like he's telling a constant joke in his head that only he thinks is funny.

Cubbie: I like him! He seems fun.

Miss Harmony: They are very nice people who are just trying to do their job. And we are very nice students who are going to play this song. Right. Now.

Skell: *(He winces as Kevin plays a note that's a full step too high.)* Nope. Can't do it. It's physically painful. My soul is getting a papercut.

Miss Harmony: *(Her eyes are still closed, trying to focus on the good parts.)* It's getting better! I can hear the melody! Just a little more focus!

Bubbles: *(She plays her part on the hand drum perfectly, but her eyes are on Engel, who sits beside her. He's holding his recorder but isn't playing, his gaze lost on the floor. His hand is tucked inside his shirt, likely holding the necklace the janitors gave him.)* Engel? Are you okay?

Engel: *(He looks up, startled, his expression clouded with sadness.)* Huh? Oh. Yeah. I'm fine. Just... not feeling very musical today.

Riley: Don't worry, Engel. None of us are. Skell's soul is dying, and Kevin sounds like he's stepping on a cat.

Kevin: Hey! This is a complex woodwind instrument! It takes finesse! And a lot of spit, apparently.

Lizzy: Ew, Kevin! Don't say that!

Robby: My triangle performance, however, is flawless. A beacon of clarity in a sea of sonic chaos.

Petunia: Nobody likes a show-off, Robby.

Miss Harmony: *(She finally lowers her tambourine, her shoulders slumping in defeat. Her smile is gone, replaced by a look of genuine, weary concern.)* Okay. Okay, you're right. This

isn't working. My apologies. It just... it felt important to try and make something cheerful today.

Ruby: It's okay, Miss Harmony. It's hard to be cheerful right now.

Bubbles: *(She puts a comforting arm around Engel's shoulder.)* It's really hard.

Miss Harmony: *(She looks at Engel, her expression softening with pity.)* I know. I know it is. Alright, new plan. Forget the song. The five minutes of free play I promised? It starts now. You can play whatever you want, or you can just talk quietly. Just... be good to each other.

Kevin: *(His face lights up.)* Yes! Rain stick, here I come!

Skell: *(He picks up his mallets, a small, grudging smile on his face.)* Finally. I can compose my masterpiece. It's called "Ode to a Wounded Ear."

Riley: I'm sure it'll be a chart-topper.

Lizzy: *(She moves over to sit with Ruby and Petunia.)* Did you guys finish the math homework from Miss Circle?

Petunia: No! The last question was impossible! It asked what the area of a shadow was. How are you supposed to measure a shadow?

Ruby: I just drew a frowny face and wrote "darkness." I'm probably going to get a bad grade.

Lizzy: I heard if you get a really bad grade, she makes you stay after class for a "special lesson." Nobody ever says what happens in them.

Cubbie: I heard they have to do a thousand math problems until their hands fall off.

Robby: That's ridiculous. Your hands can't just fall off from writing.

Riley: In this school? I wouldn't be so sure.

Bubbles: *(She ignores the others, speaking softly to Engel.)* Do you want to go to the library? We could find a book. A quiet one.

Engel: *(He shakes his head, giving her a small, grateful smile.)* No. I'm okay. It's... it's nice in here. With the noise. It's better than the quiet.

Bubbles: *(She looks at him, her large, starry eyes filled with understanding. She gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze.)* Okay. If you're sure. But I'm right here if you change your mind. We can be quiet together.

Engel: *(He nods, the small smile remaining.)* Thanks, Bubbles.

Kevin: *(He holds the rain stick, tilting it back and forth with a look of intense concentration.)* You know, the sound isn't caused by rain. It's typically filled with small pebbles, beans, or beads that cascade over a series of small pins or baffles arranged helically inside the tube. The physics of the gravitational descent and the resulting acoustic resonance are actually quite complex.

Riley: *(He blinks.)* Or... you turn the noisy stick upside down and it makes a sound.

Kevin: *(He pushes his glasses up his nose.)* Well, yes, if you want to be reductive about it.

Lizzy: *(Huddled with Ruby and Petunia.)* I'm serious, what did you guys put for that last math problem? I left it blank. I'd rather get a zero for not trying than get it wrong and have Miss Circle look at me.

Ruby: I told you, I wrote "darkness." I'm doomed.

Petunia: I tried to measure the shadow of my lamp last night with a ruler. It didn't work. My mom asked me what I was doing and I almost started crying.

Lizzy: See? It's a trick question! It has to be!

Skell: *(He's tapping out a slow, mournful melody on his xylophone.)* This is my masterpiece. It's called "Lament for a Lost Lunch Period." It's about the tater tots that will never be.

Robby: *(He chimes his triangle softly, perfectly in time with Skell's melancholic tune.)* I'm adding the shimmering highlights of sorrow.

Skell: *(He stops, glaring at Robby.)* Don't help me. You're ruining my artistic process.

Robby: I'm enhancing it! It's called collaboration!

(At the very back of the classroom, away from the other students, Oliver, Zip, and Edward had claimed a corner for themselves. They ignored the instruments, instead tearing small pieces from a music theory worksheet and rolling them into tight paper wads. Oliver, with a lazy flick of his wrist, sent one sailing across the room, where it bounced harmlessly off the back of Skell's head.)

Zip: *(She snickers quietly, already rolling another.)* Nice shot. Right in the ego.

Edward: *(He leans back in his chair, balancing it on two legs.)* This is so lame. Why do we even have to be here? Music is for babies.

Oliver: *(His eyes are scanning the room, a bored, predatory look on his face. He's not looking at Engel, but at everyone, gauging the atmosphere.)* It's a required class, Edward. Attendance is part of the "perfect record" Principal Grace is so obsessed with. We just have to endure it.

Miss Harmony: *(Her eyes catch the movement in the back. She walks over, her smile patient but firm.)* Oliver, Zip, Edward. Free play means you're free to play an instrument. It doesn't mean you're free to redecorate my classroom with spitballs.

Zip: They're not spitballs. They're spit-free paper projectiles. It's a whole different aerodynamic principle.

Miss Harmony: I'm sure it is. Now, find an instrument, please. Or you can spend your free time helping me clean the recorder mouthpieces. Your choice.

Oliver: *(He rolls his eyes, but a flicker of annoyance crosses his face. He stands up.)* Fine. We'll play. Come on.

Skell: *(He stands up, pointing a trembling finger at the back of the room.)* That's it! That's not music! That's just... auditory violence! You're committing a crime against sound itself!

Oliver: *(He grins, not missing a beat with his arrhythmic drumming.)* Relax, Picasso. It's called avant-garde. It's experimental. You probably wouldn't get it.

Edward: *(He crashes the cymbals again, wincing with exaggerated glee.)* Yeah! It's about expressing our inner chaos!

Kevin: *(He calmly turns to Riley, speaking over the din.)* Actually, the lack of a consistent time signature combined with the percussive stabs at random intervals creates a sense of profound unease. It's an effective, if primitive, way to manipulate the emotional state of the listener through auditory dissonance.

Riley: Or, they're just being jerks.

Kevin: Well, yes. That too. The intent informs the result.

Miss Harmony: *(She walks toward the back, her hands clasped, her voice strained but still trying to be positive.)* That's a very... energetic performance, boys. But music is also about listening to each other. Why don't you try to follow a simple beat? One-two-three-four. Like a heartbeat.

Zip: *(She shakes her maraca directly in Miss Harmony's direction.)* My heartbeat is way faster than that. It's more like a terrified hummingbird.

Oliver: We're just playing what we feel, Miss Harmony. You said to make it a happy feeling. This makes us happy.

Bubbles: *(She leans in close to Engel, speaking softly so only he can hear.)* It's okay. They're just being dumb. Do you want to go stand by the window? We can watch the contractors.

Engel: *(He shakes his head, watching Oliver with a wary expression.)* No. It's okay. I don't want them to see... I don't want them to think I'm scared.

Bubbles: You're the bravest person I know, Engel.

Robby: *(He stands up, holding his triangle high.)* Your rhythm is appalling! A proper percussive section requires a foundation! A structure! Here, follow my lead!

(Robby begins to ding his triangle with a frantic, desperate beat, trying to impose order on the chaos. The result is just more noise, as Oliver and Edward intentionally play against his rhythm, making the cacophony even worse.)

Lizzy: Oh my gosh, now Robby's doing it too!

Petunia: This is the worst song I've ever heard.

Miss Harmony: *(She puts her fingers to her temples, the cheerful facade finally cracking completely.)* Okay, stop! Everybody just... stop. Free play is over. Put the instruments down. Gently.

Oliver: *(He gives the drum one last, defiant BAM, then drops the mallets with a smirk.)* Fine by me. My artistic statement has been made.

Skell: The only statement you made is that you have no respect for the sanctity of the musical arts!

(The final, shrill ring of the 16:00 bell echoed through the halls of Maple High, a sound of pure, unadulterated relief for the students. In the music room, the chaotic energy of the free play session instantly transformed into the rustling, bustling energy of dismissal. Backpacks were zipped, chairs scraped against the floor, and a low, excited murmur filled the room as the students prepared for their escape.)

16:00 - The Bell's Reprieve

Miss Harmony: *(She claps her hands to get their attention, her smile warm and genuine now that the school day is officially over.)* Alright, everyone, settle down for just one more second! You were all... very creative today. Remember to put your instruments back where you found them, please.

Kevin: *(He meticulously places the rain stick back in its stand, then turns to Riley.)* Statistically, the period between the final bell and exiting the school doors is the most congested. If we wait approximately ninety seconds for the initial surge to pass, we can optimize our travel time and reduce the probability of hallway collisions by nearly sixty percent.

Riley: Or we could just shove our way through like normal people.

Kevin: That's an inefficient and chaotic variable. I prefer a data-driven approach.

Skell: *(He dramatically clutches his forehead as he puts his mallets away.)* Finally. Release from this prison of auditory and emotional torment. I need to go home and listen to a single, perfect sine wave for three hours to recalibrate my soul.

Robby: I thought your triangle solo was pretty good. It had a certain... shimmering brilliance.

Skell: Don't patronize me, Robby.

Lizzy: *(Pulling on her backpack, talking to Ruby and Petunia.)* Are you guys walking home? We should stick together.

Ruby: Definitely. I don't want to walk past the maintenance yard alone. Those new janitors are still back there, right?

Petunia: I think so. They give me the creeps a little. But not as much as Oliver does. I'm just glad he and his friends weren't in this class.

Bubbles: *(She waits patiently by the door for Engel, who is slowly packing his single notebook into his bag.)* Ready to go, Engel? We can take the long way home, past the park.

Engel: *(He looks up, managing a small, tired smile for her. He touches the spot on his shirt where the necklace rests.)* Yeah. The park sounds nice. Thanks, Bubbles.

Miss Harmony: *(Her voice is gentle as she addresses the students filing out.)* Have a good evening, everyone! Be safe walking home! Robby, please don't try to conduct traffic with your triangle again!

Robby: *(From the hallway.)* It was an effective system!

Miss Harmony: And Kevin, please just walk home! Don't calculate it!

Kevin: *(Pausing at the door.)* But a calculated walk is an efficient walk, Miss Harmony!

(He vanishes into the crowded hallway. Only Bubbles and Engel remain. Miss Harmony watches them, her expression softening with a deep, worried sadness.)

Miss Harmony: You two take care of each other, okay?

Bubbles: We always do, Miss Harmony.

Miss Harmony: *(She turns to the remaining students, her voice soft but weary.)* Thank you for helping tidy up, you four. Please make sure the recorders are in the blue bin and the xylophone mallets are back in their holder. I... I have to go check in at the main office.

Skell: Of course, Miss Harmony. We will restore this sanctuary to its former glory.

Petunia: We'll make sure it's super clean!

(Miss Harmony gives them a tired but grateful smile and walks out, pulling the door almost closed behind her, leaving Kevin, Skell, Petunia, and Cubbie alone in the quiet room.)

Cubbie: *(He starts gathering the scattered hand drums.)* She seemed really sad today. Sadder than usual.

Petunia: *(She carefully wipes down a recorder before placing it in the bin.)* Everyone's sad. The whole school feels like it's holding its breath. I just want to go home.

Skell: *(He meticulously arranges the xylophone mallets by size and color.)* The ambiance is all wrong. The chromatic energy of this place is usually a chaotic but vibrant G-sharp. Today, it's just a flat, oppressive C-minor. It's creatively stifling.

Kevin: *(He's stacking sheet music with mathematical precision.)* Or, the collective student and faculty bodies are experiencing a logical and predictable spike in cortisol and adrenaline due to the unexplained power failure during a designated meal period, leading to heightened anxiety and emotional volatility. Ambiance is merely a perceived emotional response to environmental stimuli. It's not a quantifiable energy field.

Skell: Tell that to my inner artist, Kevin. He's very disappointed in your lack of soul.

Cubbie: *(He pauses, holding a tambourine.)* Did you guys see Oliver and his friends when they were making all that noise?

Petunia: I tried not to look at them. Oliver's been extra mean lately. It's like he's trying to make everyone as miserable as he is.

Kevin: His behavior is statistically escalating. My analysis suggests a ninety-two percent probability that he's the primary instigator of at least seventy percent of all non-anomalous disruptive incidents in our grade. The data is quite conclusive.

Skell: You have data on that?

Kevin: Of course. I keep a log. It's important to understand the patterns of our social ecosystem.

Cubbie: You're weird, Kevin. But in a good way.

Petunia: I just wish he'd leave Engel alone. He's been through so much. First Claire, and... and the others. And now Oliver is always... watching him.

Kevin: Engel represents a deviation from the mean. His open display of grief is a disruption to the social order Oliver seeks to create through intimidation. Logically, Oliver would perceive him as a target.

Skell: Or maybe Oliver is just a jerk and Engel is an easy target. Sometimes it really is that simple. Not everything is a complex system, Kevin. Sometimes, things are just ugly.

(They fall into a contemplative silence for a moment, the only sounds being the soft clatter of instruments being put away. They have finished their task. The room is tidy, organized, and silent.)

(Inside Command Post 1, the air hummed with the low, steady thrum of servers and ventilation systems. The initial adrenaline from Iota-10's infiltration and Principal Grace's interrogation had subsided, replaced by the quiet, grinding tension of a protracted wait. The large holographic map of Maple High glowed in the center of the room, a silent monument to the complex battle that awaited them in the morning. Logistics Officer Baker was meticulously organizing digital supply manifests, while Intelligence Analyst Chen cross-referenced data streams from the school's external perimeter.)

Urgent Shift: Dismissal Spotted

Logistics Officer Baker: *(He sighs, running a thin hand over his face.)* I've triple-checked the deployment rosters for Gamma-7 and Lambda-5. If I have to read the phrase "non-newtonian fluid dynamics" one more time, I'm going to request a transfer to Keter-duty. At least the monsters there are straightforward.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(He doesn't look up from his console, his eyes tracing lines of code.)* The logistical complexities of a multi-front anomalous engagement are significant, Baker. Precision in the planning phase prevents casualties in the execution phase. It's a necessary burden.

Commander Echo: *(His voice is a low, steady rumble from his command chair, where he observes the static map.)* Chen is correct. We go in tomorrow with a plan that accounts for every variable we know. The anomalous teachers, Oliver's reality-bending, the school's fluid architecture, and Alice herself. There is no room for error.

(The quiet, professional atmosphere is broken by a faint, distant sound filtering through the high-fidelity audio sensors monitoring the school. It's a chime, mundane and familiar. The junior comms operator, Field Agent Roberts, tilts his head.)

Field Agent Roberts (Comms Op): Commander. Audio sensors picking up an institutional bell. Time is 16:00.

Logistics Officer Baker: *(He glances at his chronometer, a look of mild relief on his face.)* Four o'clock. Dismissal. Good. Let them go home. An empty campus tomorrow makes our job significantly cleaner. Less potential for... complications.

Commander Echo: *(He gives a slow, affirming nod, his gaze still locked on the school schematic.)* That was the expectation. An empty school is a contained battlefield. Roberts, patch in Overwatch-7's primary visual feed. I want confirmation the moment the last student is clear of the school grounds.

Field Agent Roberts (Comms Op): *(Tapping his console.)* Yes, sir. Patching Overwatch-7A to the main display now.

(The holographic map wavers and is replaced by a crystal-clear, long-range view of the front entrance of Maple High. The doors swing open, and a trickle of students emerges, followed by a veritable flood. They pour out onto the campus grounds, laughing, chasing each other, their colorful paper forms a stark contrast to the grim tension inside the command post.)

(A sudden, sharp burst of static crackled through the comms, followed by Overwatch-7A's voice, sharp with urgency and disbelief.)

Overwatch Soren Jaeger: *(His voice cuts across the tactical channels.)* Overwatch-7A to Commander Echo! I have visual confirmation! Students are... they're out. It's 16:00. Dismissal is underway.

Logistics Officer Baker: *(He glances at his chronometer, then at the sprawling map indicating the MTF convoy's distant position.)* Right on schedule. But the primary battalions are still nine hours out. That's a long time for a soft perimeter.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(His face is a mask of concentration as he analyzes the new variable.)* Agreed. Our mission parameters called for a full investigation of the campus after hours, once a hard cordon was established by the main force. With the students dispersing now, the environment is uncontrolled.

Commander Echo: *(His voice is calm, but carries an immense weight of calculation. He doesn't raise his voice or slam his fist; he simply analyzes the new, flawed equation before him.)* This complicates our timeline. An uncontrolled dispersal of the student body means a potential loss of environmental control before our primary force is in position. The hostiles are still inside that building.

Logistics Officer Baker: If they choose to act now, or to leave with the students... our ability to track them is severely limited.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: And our after-hours investigation of the empty school just became significantly more hazardous. We won't know if any of the hostiles have remained.

Commander Echo: *(He nods, his decision made.)* Our window of opportunity is closing faster than anticipated. We need to adapt our strategy. Immediately.

Intelligence Analyst Chen: *(He brings a new schematic onto the main screen, highlighting dispersal routes.)* The students are scattering. Within thirty minutes, they'll be fully integrated into the civilian population of the county. Our window to track any who might have been... influenced... is closing.

Logistics Officer Baker: And our window to investigate the empty school is gone. We have to assume the hostiles will alter their behavior now that the students are leaving. We've lost our baseline.

Commander Echo: Then we need a new one. We can't go in blind. The battalions are still too far out to act on any new intelligence we gather now. We need eyes on the inside.

(A calm, clear voice cuts through the tense discussion on the comms channel. It's Agent Anya.)

Anya: Commander, this is Anya. This situation... it's an opportunity.

Commander Echo: *(He turns his full attention to the comms speaker.)* Explain, Agent.

Anya: The dismissal creates chaos and distraction. The anomalous teachers are creatures of routine, their focus is on the students *inside* the school. With the students leaving, their patterns will shift. This is the perfect time to observe that shift.

Kofia: *(His voice joins hers, building on the idea.)* Kofia here, Commander. Let us go back. We can resume our janitorial cover immediately. We can blend in with the departing students and the few staff members who remain after hours.

Logistics Officer Baker: Go back? You just exfiltrated! We have no hard perimeter to support you!

Anya: That's why it will work. No one is expecting a Foundation presence now. We can move freely. Our objective would be to observe the after-hours routines of Miss Circle, Miss Bloomie, and Thavel. We can confirm their locations for the morning assault and gather critical intelligence on their behavior when the school is "empty."

Kofia: It's our only chance to get ahead of them. We can't afford to wait nine hours for the convoy. By then, the entire situation inside could be different.

Commander Echo: *(He considers their proposal for a long, silent moment. The risk is immense, but the potential reward is invaluable. He looks at Chen, who gives a subtle, affirming nod.)* It's a dangerous, unorthodox, and incredibly risky plan. I approve. Get your gear. You will re-infiltrate the campus under janitorial cover immediately.

(He leans forward, his voice dropping to emphasize the final, critical point.)

Commander Echo: Your new objective: observe, record, and report. Locate your asset, Engel. Re-establish contact, ensure he is safe, and continue to build that rapport. He is your most valuable source of intel on the school's internal dynamics. But under no circumstances are you to break your cover or attempt an extraction. It is too risky for him to know the full truth. We need him unaware and on the inside. Is that understood?

Anya: Perfectly, Commander. Maintain cover, protect the asset.

Kofia: We're on it. Let's go see what school looks like when the bell rings.

(Anya and Kofia moved with practiced ease through the sparse grounds of the command post, their civilian-issue janitor uniforms feeling strangely light after their Foundation gear. They walked with a casual slouch, pushing a janitor's cart that now discreetly housed a battery of advanced sensors and the crucial Scranton Reality Detection (SRD) unit. Their hidden cameras, no bigger than a fleck of dust on their thin bodies, were already relaying a live feed to the command centers.)

Undercover Observations: A Deceptive Calm

Anya: *(Her voice a low murmur into her hidden comms, maintaining the illusion of casual conversation as they walked toward the school.)* Alright, Kofia. Comms check. SRD unit calibrated?

Kofia: *(Matching her tone, giving the cart's wheel a deliberate squeak for authenticity.)* Comms are green. SRD is reading a baseline of one point zero Humes. Perfectly, boringly normal out here. You'd never know there's a circus of horrors just a few hundred meters away.

Anya: That's the point. It's a deceptive calm. The anomaly is contained, for now. Our job is to see what happens when the audience goes home.

Kofia: Right. Let's just hope the performers don't decide to start an after-show just for us.

(From the First Command Post, Echo's voice filtered through their earpieces, addressed to all connected units.)

Commander Echo: *(On comms.)* Alright, Agents. You're approaching the main school exterior. All units, monitor Agents Anya and Kofia's live feeds. Pay particular attention to the SRD data. We need to establish a baseline for the environment outside the immediate school perimeter.

(As Anya and Kofia rounded a cluster of manicured hedges, the sight of Maple High's sprawling facade came into view. The schoolyard was alive with activity. Clusters of students sat on benches, chatting, while others played a lazy game of hopscotch, their paper forms fluttering lightly in the breeze. A few leaned against the brick walls, scrolling on their phones. They looked... utterly normal.)

Kofia: *(Whispering into his comms, his voice tinged with surprise.)* Commander, Overwatch-7's report was accurate; they're outside. But they're not dispersing. They're just... milling about. Like it's a regular afternoon.

Anya: *(Her hidden camera zooming in on a group of students laughing, their faces devoid of any discernible fear.)* It's... deceptively calm out here. No signs of panic. No rush to leave. They're acting like typical kids, waiting for rides, or for their friends to finish packing up.

Commander Echo: *(His voice was calm, but held a hint of professional curiosity.)* Understood. All units, observe the student behavior. Note any anomalies, however subtle. Agent Kofia, Agent Anya, confirm your Humes readings.

Kofia: *(His eyes flickered to the small display hidden on his wrist.)* Commander, the SRD is... reading absolutely nothing. A flat 1.0. No fluctuation. It's perfectly stable out here.

Anya: Confirmed. As normal as anywhere else in Maple County. It's almost unsettling how mundane it is.

(Anya and Kofia continued their slow, casual patrol, pushing their cart along the school's perimeter fence, blending into the scene of everyday dismissal. They passed groups of students, catching snippets of conversation about homework, sports tryouts, and weekend plans. There was no visible sign of the horrors they knew were lurking just inside the school's walls.)

Engel's Afternoon Dismissal

(Engel traced a pattern on the dusty bench with his finger, his gaze distant. The chaotic, happy sounds of the other students seemed to be happening in another world. Bubbles sat close to him, not talking, just being a quiet, comforting presence.)

Bubbles: *(Her voice is soft, a gentle rustle.)* Miss Harmony tried really hard today, didn't she?

Engel: *(He nods without looking up.)* Yeah. She did. It... it wasn't the same as with Mr. Demi, though. She looked sad.

Bubbles: Everyone looks sad. I saw Miss Emily talking to Miss Sasha by the lockers, and they both just looked... tired. So tired.

Engel: At least Oliver and his friends left her alone. That music they were making... it wasn't music. It was just noise. It hurt my head.

Bubbles: *(She giggles softly, trying to lighten the mood.)* I know! And Kevin was trying to explain it to me. He said it was "auditory dissonance designed to provoke a negative emotional response." I think he just meant it was bad.

Engel: *(He manages a small, weak smile.)* Kevin knows a lot of words.

Bubbles: He tried to tell Skell that his sad song about tater tots was "melodically predictable," and I thought Skell was going to throw his xylophone at him.

Engel: *(His smile fades, a familiar sorrow creeping back into his eyes.)* I wish Mr. Demi was here. He would have just laughed and made them all play together. He always knew how to make things fun. Even when they were bad.

Bubbles: *(She nudges him gently with her shoulder.)* He'll be back. He has to. Who else is going to teach us how to play the recorder without sounding like a dying goose?

Engel: You don't sound like a dying goose.

Bubbles: *(She grins.)* That's because Mr. Demi is a miracle worker. Are you... are you going to be okay walking home?

Engel: *(He shrugs, his gaze falling back to the bench.)* I guess. I just... I don't like how quiet my house is now. It feels too empty.

(He instinctively touches his chest, feeling the faint outline of the Myth-Weaver necklace beneath his shirt. A secret comfort. A reminder that maybe he wasn't completely alone.)

Bubbles: *(She scoots a little closer on the bench, her own cheerful expression softening with a deep, genuine sympathy. The duck on her head seems to droop a little in solidarity.)* I... I know. My house is too loud. My little brothers are always making a mess with their crayons. You could... you could come over to my house, if you want. We could play that star-collecting game. Or just draw. My mom won't mind.

Engel: *(He shakes his head, not looking at her. His voice is a small, sad murmur.)* Thanks, Bubbles. But... I don't want to be a bother.

Bubbles: You're never a bother, Engel! Never! It's just me and my duck. He's a really good listener. And he won't try to make you talk if you don't want to. We could just sit and be quiet together. That's better than being quiet alone, right?

Engel: *(He finally looks at her, a flicker of a grateful smile touching his lips.)* Yeah. Maybe.

Bubbles: *(Her face brightens, sensing a small victory.)* We were all supposed to go to the park this weekend. Remember? Claire was going to bring her kite. The big one that looks like a dragon.

Engel: *(He nods, his gaze turning distant again as the memory washes over him.)* She finished drawing the final scale on its tail last week. She was so proud of it. Lana was going to bring the snacks, and Abbie was going to find a good spot for our picnic blanket.

Bubbles: *(Her own voice grows quiet, the cheerfulness momentarily gone, replaced by a shared sadness.)* I know. I miss them. It's so weird not having them here. It feels like... like a piece of our drawing is just... erased.

Engel: *(He looks down at his hands, his thin fingers fidgeting.)* Yeah. Erased.

(Engel stares at his hands, the word "erased" hanging in the air between them, heavy and final. Bubbles sees the wave of sadness wash over him again and knows she has to change the scenery, both physically and emotionally.)

Bubbles: *(She hops off the bench with a sudden, determined energy, her paper curls bouncing. She holds out a hand to him.)* You know what? Sitting here is a bummer. This bench is full of splinters, and looking at the school just... it feels yucky right now.

Engel: *(He doesn't look up, his voice quiet.)* It's just a bench, Bubbles.

Bubbles: No, it's a sad bench! Come on. Let's go to the park. We can sit on the swings. It's always better at the park. You can see the whole sky, and there aren't any... any empty classrooms to look at.

Engel: *(He hesitates, shaking his head slightly.)* I don't know... I don't really feel like walking.

Bubbles: *(Her hand is still outstretched, patient but insistent. Her voice is soft but firm.)* We don't have to walk fast. We can walk super slow. So slow that snails will pass us and laugh. But we have to go. It's not good to just sit in the sad spots, Engel. Come on. For me? We'll see if we can find another cloud that looks like a paper dog.

(Engel looks at her outstretched hand, then up at her face, at her big, starry eyes filled with a stubborn, unwavering kindness. He takes a slow, shaky breath and finally, reaches out and takes her hand. His fingers are cool against hers.)

Engel: *(His voice is barely a whisper.)* Okay. The park sounds... okay.

Bubbles: *(Her face breaks into a genuine, relieved smile. She gives his hand a gentle squeeze.)* See? It'll be great. Way better than this sad-napkin bench. Let's go.

(She gently tugs, and he stands up, grabbing his backpack with his free hand. Together, the two turn away from the looming shadow of the school and begin their slow walk toward the park, their hands still clasped together.)

(As Engel and Bubbles disappeared down the street towards the park, a small pocket of innocence in a deeply compromised world, Anya and Kofia were left standing by their janitor's cart. The sounds of the remaining students filled the air—laughter, idle chatter, the scuff of shoes on pavement. The agents exchanged a brief, professional nod and began their slow, methodical patrol around the school's perimeter.)

(Meanwhile, 200 meters away from the front gates, Engel and Bubbles were walking down a quiet, tree-lined street that led to the park. Their forms were silhouetted by the afternoon sun.)

(Anya and Kofia moved silently along the perimeter fence at the back of the campus, their cleaning cart rumbling softly over cracked asphalt. The air was heavy with the distant, muffled sounds of the school day continuing inside. They were vigilant, but the area was eerily, profoundly normal.)

Kofia: *(He kicked a stray pebble with his shoe, the sound sharp in the quiet afternoon air.)* Weird, right? We've been back here for twenty minutes and all we've found is a particularly determined-looking ant and a crushed juice box. I was expecting, I don't know, a portal to another dimension, at least.

Anya: *(She kept her gaze fixed on the windows of the school, her head on a swivel.)* It's the most dangerous kind of normal, Kofia. It lulls you into a false sense of security. The absence of a problem doesn't mean the problem isn't there.

Kofia: So, what are you saying? The anomaly is taking a siesta? The monsters are on break?

Anya: They're on lunch break, Kofia. There's a difference.

Kofia: *(He pushed the cart forward, its wheels giving a soft, protesting squeak.)* Man, this place is so quiet. Too quiet for a school. You'd think there would be some noise, some life.

Anya: *(She adjusted her position, her eyes scanning the empty windows.)* There is no noise, Kofia. This isn't a normal school. Sound doesn't travel the same way here. The ambient noise is dampened, almost non-existent.

Kofia: *(He shuddered slightly.)* That's just a little bit creepy. Like the world is holding its breath.

Anya: *(She nodded slowly.)* It's unnatural. It's a key part of the anomaly. The school itself is a prison of silence.

Kofia: And we're the two brave janitors who've been tasked with dusting the cell bars. Just another Tuesday.

Anya: *(Her voice was flat and dry.)* Focus, Kofia. This is serious.

Kofia: I am focused! I'm just expressing my profound unease through humor! It's a coping mechanism. A very effective one. What's the plan if we run into a "teacher"?

Anya: We don't. We avoid them at all costs. Just observe them and report, not to engage.

Kofia: What do you think they do after hours, anyway? Reorganize the library by the date of publication?

Anya: *(She shook her head, a hint of a smile on her lips.)* I don't know. But I'm sure we'll find out eventually.

Kofia: I'd rather not. I've heard enough horror stories about this place to last a lifetime.

Anya: *(Her expression hardened, her smile vanishing.)* We have to keep going. We have to finish this. For the kids.

Kofia: *(He glanced down at the ground, a somber expression on his face.)* I know. This just feels so... final, somehow. Like we're the last people on Earth.

Anya: Then?. But we're the only ones who can save them.

Kofia: I guess so. *(He stopped pushing the cart for a moment, letting the silence settle around them.)* Is it weird that I feel like they're watching us? The teachers? I know they're not here, but... it feels like their eyes are everywhere.

Anya: *(She gently placed a hand on his shoulder.)* That's the fear talking, Kofia. We're safe. For now. Now let's go. We have a lot of ground to cover.

Kofia: Right. *(He pushed the cart, resuming their slow, steady pace.)* Just two janitors, making our rounds. The most important, terrifying, soul-crushing rounds ever.

Anya: Just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. And we'll get through this.

(Anya and Kofia continued their patrol, pushing their cleaning cart down a long, quiet corridor. The walls were lined with lockers, all closed and silent. Their footsteps, and the rhythmic squeak of the cart, were the only sounds.)

Kofia: Alright, this is it. We've hit the end of the back perimeter. Looks like we've cleared the entire area.

Anya: *(She looked at her datapad, her finger tracing a line on the schematic.)* Confirmed. No anomalous activity. The energy readings are a flat line. No visual confirmations of anything out of the ordinary.

Kofia: See? I told you. Just a quiet school after all. My nerves were twitching for nothing.

Anya: I wouldn't say that. The lack of anything is almost more unsettling. It's too clean. Too perfect.

Kofia: A what now?

Anya: Let's keep moving. We've seen all we're going to see back here.

Kofia: Sounds like a plan. So, what's our next move?

Anya: We need to get eyes on the front of the school. See if there's anything to report from the other side.

Kofia: The front. Right. The part where the kids are all gathering to go home. You think they'll notice us?

Anya: We're janitors, Kofia. We're invisible. No one ever looks at the people who clean up their messes.

Kofia: True. I'll just try to look extra bored. It's part of the cover.

Anya: And try not to drop anything. The last thing we need is a commotion.

Kofia: *(He gave a dramatic sigh.)* No promises. My grip on this mop is tenuous at best.

Anya: *(She shook her head, a dry amusement in her tone.)* Just push the cart. And keep your eyes open.

Kofia: On it.

Anya: Anything from the sensors?

Kofia: Negative, baseline is normal, no sign of breathing.

Anya: We keep walking. And we keep looking.

Kofia: I've got a bad feeling about this, Anya. A real bad feeling.

Anya: *(She placed a steadying hand on his shoulder.)* I know. Just trust the plan.

Kofia: The plan. Right. Let's go.

(Anya and Kofia pushed their cart out of the final corridor and into the main artery of the school, the hub of student activity. The back of the campus had been eerily quiet, but the front was a chaotic symphony of laughter, shouting, and the rustling of paper forms. They found an unobtrusive alcove by a row of lockers, where they could observe without drawing

attention. They leaned against the cart, a pair of exhausted figures melting into the background of a bustling, seemingly normal school day.)

Front steps Between Bells

(They take the shade by the main pillars and stay put; morning runs on its usual tracks—shoelaces get re-tied, snacks disappear, somebody laughs too loud and then blushes. The building is trying to look ordinary, and from here, it mostly works.)

Agent Kofía: *(keeps his back on the pillar)* The plan. Right. Let's go.

Agent Anya: *(doesn't shift her feet)* We park here, blend into the stairs, and just watch the rhythm—tiny pauses, little tells, nothing dramatic.

Miss Harmony: *(coasting by with sheet music tucked close)* Phones down by the third step, loves. Save the solos for rehearsal, not the stairs.

Coach Roberts: *(voice carrying from the rail)* Jog, don't sprint—save the heroics for PE where I can grade them.

Student Chloe: *(to a friend, not slowing)* If this milk tea spills again, I'm converting to a religion with better lids.

Assistant Baker Tom: *(walking past with a tray)* Two-for-one at lunch if you promise to actually chew.

Mister Hotchpot: *(stack of handouts squared perfectly)* Bell starts class, door ends it, your head continues it—try to attend all three.

Ms. Karina: *(easing a slim cart along)* Arts club after last bell, darlings; please don't eat the glue—it's for posters, not protein.

Agent Kofía: *(still, eyes lazy)* Same crowd, new stories. Good sign.

Agent Anya: *(same spot, same angle)* Yeah. Front flow's honest. Let's keep it that way.

(The bell is still a rumor. They stay exactly where they are—hands free, posture easy, attention on a low simmer.)

Agent Anya: *(soft, conversational)* Mornings like this make me, I don't know, softer. Everyone's still deciding who they want to be by lunch, and you can see it in the small

stuff—how they fix a collar, how they breathe right before the door, how they pretend they're not nervous even though, yeah, they kind of are.

Agent Kofía: (*nods without turning*) I like the small stuff. You get more truth from a strap adjusted twice than from a speech. Today I'm reading shoes, then hands, then shoulders. Keeps me honest, keeps me from, uh, inventing problems that aren't there.

Agent Anya: I'm doing hands, eyes, mouth—what they hold, what they avoid, what they tell the air. And jokes, because if a joke lands, first period hurts less. That's basically science—cafeteria science, but still.

Agent Kofía: (*half-smile you'd miss if you blinked*) Cafeteria science passes peer review every lunch hour. And—this might sound silly—I kind of love how normal "normal" looks from here. It's messy in a kind way. If I could bottle it, I would.

Agent Anya: Not silly. Same. Do you ever miss being on this side of it? Not the mission, just the simple "please let today be regular" feeling, you know?

Agent Kofía: I still live in that feeling. I just hide it better now. Coffee helps. Having a plan helps more. Having you here to keep me from solving tomorrow's problem today helps the most.

Agent Anya: (*a tiny laugh*) Deal—if you keep me from fixing things that aren't broken yet. I, uh, sometimes jump the gun. A lot.

Agent Kofía: We both do. So let's make it boring on purpose: careful, kind, boring until we can't. If that's all we manage before lunch, I'm calling it a win.

Agent Anya: Put that on a mug. Plain white, chipped handle, so no one "accidentally borrows" it.

Agent Kofía: (*eyes stay forward*) East ramp's quiet. Faculty lot looks asleep. Main doors are breathing fine. If anything weird shows up, a person carries it out—won't be the building.

Agent Anya: People we can read. Hallways just creak and act mysterious, and honestly, I'm out of patience for mysterious after last night.

Agent Kofía: Same. Quick life check—when this case closes, first thing you do?

Agent Anya: Wash my hands without counting seconds, then sleep without writing the report in my head. After that—text someone who thinks "mission" just means trying hard at being human and let that be enough for a day.

Agent Kofía: *(quiet, sincere)* Keep that person.

Agent Anya: Planning to. You?

Agent Kofía: River. No radios. Sit where the water talks and we don't. I'll bring snacks I don't have to explain.

Agent Anya: I'll bring the rule that we're allowed to actually enjoy them. And—okay—if you had to pick: great at the job and average at being a person, or the other way around?

Agent Kofía: I don't buy that trade. If "great at the job" costs being a person, then it's a bad job. Full stop.

Agent Anya: *(low, warm)* Thanks for saying it clean. I needed to hear it out loud.

Agent Kofía: One more line for the mug: leave people better, or at least not worse. It's a low bar that saves lives.

Agent Anya: I can live with that. And, hey, front's still calm. A few "I'm fine" waves to nobody. Stress, not danger. We can work with that.

(A thin line of static opens in their ears; the crowd sound dips by a notch. Their voices shift to work—plain, tight, no fluff.)

Commander Echo (Comms): *(even, clipped)* Tango-Blue, front steps. Status—plain language.

Agent Anya: *(eyes forward, doesn't move)* Front is stable. Student traffic heavy but normal. No temperature anomalies. No Hume dips.

Agent Kofía: Security visible and calm. Vendors passing on usual cycles. Staff steady. No repeat passes that look like surveillance.

Commander Echo (Comms): Interior sweep?

Agent Anya: Completed earlier. Corridors quiet. Cover intact.

Agent Kofía: Signage unchanged. Doors normal. If anything triggers, it will be person-borne, not environmental.

Commander Echo (Comms): Minor incidents?

Agent Anya: One skateboard fall. No injury. No staff response needed.

Agent Kofía: One near-spill of a drink. Resolved. No issue.

Commander Echo (Comms): Copy. Hold posture.

Commander Echo (Comms): New tasking: locate Engel. Last ping shows him inside before first wave. Expect a front exit for cover. Shadow only. No contact unless he moves toward harm or property damage.

Agent Anya: Copy. Shadow only. Intervene on red criteria.

Commander Echo (Comms): Behavioral tells unchanged: bag switches hands during deception; stride shortens for three steps after.

Agent Kofía: Routes noted—front primary, east ramp secondary, faculty lot tertiary. Confirm: no scheduled admin appointment for Engel today?

Commander Echo (Comms): Confirmed: no appointment. If he moves to admin, treat as improvisation. Intercept only to prevent damage.

Agent Anya: Acknowledged. Monitoring hands and gait first, then face.

Commander Echo (Comms): Keep the channel low-traffic. Report on visual.

Agent Kofía: Copy. Channel on simmer.

Commander Echo (Comms): Do not engage with the innocence routine. It is practiced.

Agent Anya: Noted.

Agent Kofía: Copy.

Commander Echo (Comms): I'm dark unless called. Proceed.

(The line goes quiet again. The steps keep breathing. They remain exactly where they are—waiting is the work.)

Agent Anya: *(same stance, same shade)* If he's still inside, he picked the maze over the street. That's nerves or pride. Shoulders will tell us which.

Agent Kofía: Nervous shoulders fold in. Proud shoulders lift and lock. I'll watch shoulders and hands. You take hands and eyes?

Agent Anya: Yeah—hands first. The bag forgets its usual side for a heartbeat, and the eyes do that quick “did I pass?” look. I'll flag either. And I'm not, like, staring—just... noticing.

Agent Kofía: Mouth, too. People practice an apology to the air when they're about to lie. It's subtle, but it shows up more than you'd think.

Agent Anya: *(breathes out slow)* You good for energy? You sounded a little tight earlier.

Agent Kofía: Good enough. Slept in pieces. Borrowing steadiness from the plan. You?

Agent Anya: I'm fine on borrowed steady until lunch. After that, I'm cashing in the river plan, no excuses.

Agent Kofía: Done. Snacks on me.

Agent Anya: *(eyes forward, tone easy)* Group by the rail—navy backpack, white scuff, fast chewing. Not Engel. Just nerves. Our guy does the “late but harmless” thing—brisk walk, one time check, bag switch, head level. He tries to look average and somehow makes it too tidy.

Agent Kofía: Agreed. If he wants cover, he'll use the main doors because that's where you disappear without trying. And, uh, we're not moving from here. We don't need to.

Agent Anya: We won't. We'll let him come to the picture we already have. We just... keep being part of the stairs.

Agent Kofía: *(quiet, almost to himself)* Boring on purpose. It's harder than it sounds.

Agent Anya: Yeah, but it's kinder than it looks. And it works.

Agent Kofía: If he doesn't surface soon, we can still wait. No rush call from me. Patience usually gets more truth than speed.

Agent Anya: Same. We're fine right here. No countdowns. No sweeping. Just... wait and listen.

Swings and Sidewalk

*(They don't know it yet, but **Agent Anya** and **Agent Kofia** are still watching the school steps. The Park is 200m away from maple high, while **Student Engel** and **Student Bubbles** have already wandered off. A few blocks away, the small park is busy in a gentle way—two kids trade turns on a cracked basketball, a scooter hums by, and the swings creak like old paper. The sky is big here; the noise is kinder.)*

Student Bubbles: *(kicking slow, letting the swing do the work)* Okay, verdict: this park is, like, eighty percent better than that bench. The bench was giving me splinter propaganda. Here, we've got sky, we've got squeaky swings, we've got that tree that looks like a sad broccoli. Also, um, I brought gummies—grape and mystery. Want mystery?

Student Engel: *(hands wrapped around the swing chains)* If "mystery" is the yellow one that tastes like cleaning supplies, I'm going to say no and also "never again." But—yeah, the park is better. It feels... I don't know... less crowded in my head out here.

Student Bubbles: *(fishes in her pocket, triumphant)* Plot twist: mystery is purple today. See? They learned. Also, your head deserves non-crowded. We can do non-crowded. We can do slow-talk, no-talk, cloud-counting—whatever you need, I'm, uh, here for it.

Student Engel: I like the cloud-counting option. And the slow-talk. Fast talk makes me mix up words and then I feel dumb, which I know isn't true, but my brain still votes "dumb" and wins by, like, a landslide.

Student Bubbles: Your brain needs a better campaign manager. We should print stickers: "Engel: Actually Smart." Also buttons. I'll ask Ms. Karina for poster glue and not eat it this time. Maybe. Probably.

Student Engel: *(smiles, small but real)* Please don't eat the glue. Also, if we're printing stickers, can mine have a tiny kite on it? Just... because.

Student Bubbles: Yeah. Kite sticker, coming soon. With, uh, a little dragon tail? Not sad—just, like, strong. And maybe sparkles, but the non-messy kind. If that exists.

Student Engel: Non-messy sparkles are a myth, like socks that don't disappear. But I won't say no. Hey—do you ever wish swings could go sideways? Not, like, dangerously, just... differently. Forward-back feels like a metronome. Sideways would be a song.

Student Bubbles: Oh! Sideways swings would be amazing. We'd invent a game—diagonal tag. And the rules are basically "don't face-plant," which I think we can manage. Speaking of games, uh, we still have that star-collecting one on my tablet. No pressure, but we could play after, if you want.

Student Engel: I want. I like that the stars in that game don't run away when you get close. They just... wait. It's polite of them. People should try that.

Student Bubbles: People are bad at waiting because waiting is quiet and quiet gets loud if you let it. Stars don't mind loud. They're busy burning things and looking pretty. Also, I got a rare comet skin last night and I didn't brag yet, so—this is me bragging. I'm very humble about it.

Student Engel: (*teasing a little*) Congratulations on your humble comet. I'll try not to be jealous. Um—do you think that duck on your head can, like, sense weather? Because he's looking at that cloud like it owes him money.

Student Bubbles: (*tilts her head; the duck wobbles*) He's our meteorologist. Highly trained. He says we have, uh, fifteen minutes of sunshine and then a dramatic breeze that makes us pretend we're not cold. Very official.

Student Engel: I'll trust him. He's never wrong about snacks or weather. Which—speaking of—grape gummy accepted. Thanks. Do you think the others would have liked this park? The way the light looks on the slide? The way the grass... keeps trying even where it's mostly dirt?

Student Bubbles: Yeah. Claire would've named that tree, like, "Sir Broccoli the Third." Abbie would've turned the slide into a spaceship. Lana would've told us not to run on the path and then been the first one to run on the path. I, um, I can hear it if I try.

Student Engel: Me too. Sometimes I hear it when I don't try. It's like my head keeps replaying the part where everything was easy so it can argue with the parts where everything isn't.

Student Bubbles: (*gentle*) Then we give your head new parts. Small ones. Like—today we count seven good clouds, we win. Or we make up rules for that weird squirrel over there. He looks like he owes taxes.

Student Engel: New rules: the squirrel owes exactly three nuts to the park every morning. If he forgets, the swings squeak louder as a fine. Also, he's friends with the pigeon who walks like a tiny detective.

Student Bubbles: (*snorts*) Detective Pigeon! Solves crimes like, "Where did my fry go?" Answer: his mouth. Case closed. Okay, serious question, slightly less silly—what helps more when your head crowds up? Talking, drawing, or, like, just... staying quiet with a person near you?

Student Engel: Depends on the day. Today? Drawing might be good later. For now, the “person near me” thing wins. Talking with no quiz at the end. Swinging with no goal. Gummy with no flavor names that lie.

Student Bubbles: I can do that. I’m great at no-quiz talking. And I only lie about flavors when it’s funny. Which is, uh, hardly ever. Also, random—what’s your best snack? Like, top-tier, would-fight-a-dragon snack.

Student Engel: Warm cheese bread. The kind that makes your hands shiny and you don’t care. Or those little seaweed sheets that taste like the ocean waving hello. You?

Student Bubbles: Sweet-corn ice cream, which people say is weird, but they are wrong and should be educated kindly. And cheesy chips that turn your fingers orange and then you panic-wash because you touched your drawing.

Student Engel: *(laughs under his breath)* Cheesy fingerprints on art: the sequel. Okay—another random: if we had a paper airplane race from this swing set to that bench, who wins? Me with a plain design, or you with a fancy one that looks cool but doesn’t fly straight?

Student Bubbles: I win because I tape a secret paperclip in the nose. Kidding! (Mostly.) Real answer: we tie and pretend it was on purpose because friendship. Also, paperclips are heavy—learned that the hard way.

Student Engel: Friendship tie. I’ll take it. And—um—thanks for getting me out of there. The bench was getting heavier by the minute. The park... it gives me room to, I don’t know, breathe without asking permission.

Student Bubbles: You don’t need permission to breathe. Not from me, not from benches, not from sad broccoli trees. You’re allowed. Always. And if your head tries to argue, I will respectfully tell it to hush and hand it a gummy.

Student Engel: Deal. If your head gets too loud, I’ll return the favor with a cheese bread. That’s my hush token. Very effective.

Student Bubbles: *(nods, kicks once, lets the swing slow again)* Okay, tiny plan: we watch the kids play for a bit, then we walk slow-slow to my place, tablet time for the star game, maybe a doodle if it feels right, and we send a picture to—um, to the sky, I guess. Not because it does anything. Just because it’s nice.

Student Engel: I like the plan. Slow-slow, no quizzes, send a picture to the sky. And if the breeze gets dramatic like your duck said, we’ll pretend we’re not cold together, which is easier than pretending alone.

Student Bubbles: Together pretending is basically real warmth. Science. Trust the duck.

Student Engel: *(looks up; the clouds are obliging)* Trust the duck. And the swings. And you.

Student Bubbles: *(nudges her swing so it barely moves)* Yeah. Trust the duck, trust the swings, and—uh—thanks for trusting me too. We can just sit here and be regular, or talk about anything, or nothing. I'm good with all of that, promise.

Student Engel: *(thumbs the chain, thinking)* I believe you. It's... easier to breathe when I don't have to pick the "right" kind of talking. Sometimes my brain wants clouds and dumb jokes; sometimes it wants to say the heavy thing and not scare people away.

Student Bubbles: *(gentle)* You can say the heavy thing. I won't run. If I need a second, I'll tell you, but I'm not going anywhere. Also I have, like, four gummies left—emotional support gummies.

Student Engel: *(hesitates)* Okay. The heavy thing is the, um, event for Claire in the gym... the slideshow, the candles, Ms. Harmony singing that soft song. I keep... seeing it on loop. Even the smell of floor wax brings it back. I wanted to be brave, but I felt like my feet were cement. I miss her so much it makes my ribs feel too small.

Student Bubbles: *(eyes wet, voice steady)* I know. I felt that, too. It was beautiful and awful at the same time, like the world was trying to do right by her and still... not having her there was the loudest part. You don't have to be brave for me. Missing her is—yeah. It's real.

Student Engel: She used to laugh at the vending machine because it always "ate" her coins, and she'd pat it like a stubborn dog until it changed its mind. I keep waiting to hear that laugh in the hallway. At the event, when they showed the picture of her with the crooked paper crown, I—uh—I had to stare at my shoes so I wouldn't cry like a fire alarm.

Student Bubbles: *(soft chuckle leaks out)* The paper crown she won for "most dramatic sneeze." She wore it like royalty the whole afternoon. I keep hearing her say, "Bubbles, hydrate or diedrate," and then handing me a water like a tiny nurse. Maybe... maybe we can collect those lines. Like, actively grab them before they float away.

Student Engel: You won't think it's weird if I talk about her a lot? Sometimes people get this face like, "Move on," and I... I can't, not like that. I don't want to lose the good parts trying to outrun the sad parts.

Student Bubbles: Not weird. Keep the good parts. We can have two things at once—missing her and still doing today. If it gets too big, we can pause, but we don't have to pretend it isn't there just to make other people comfy.

Student Engel: *(voice small)* I dreamed about her last week. She was sitting on the curb by the canteen, swinging her legs, asking if I'd eaten. I said yes, and she made that face like, "Are you lying?" and then she laughed, and I woke up with my chest feeling... heavy, but also like I'd been given something. I don't know what to do with that feeling after.

Student Bubbles: Maybe we give the feeling a job. We could write her a little note when that happens—like, "Hey Claire, I ate, stop policing me," and fold it into a paper kite. Not to fix anything, just to send it up a bit. Or, if kite is too much, we whisper it to the swing and let the swing keep it.

Student Engel: The kite idea... fits. She liked sky things. I'm scared I'll forget her voice someday, and I hate that fear. If I write, maybe it slows the forgetting down. Or changes it into... remembering on purpose.

Student Bubbles: We can build a "Claire library," tiny edition—voice lines, vending machine adventures, crown moments. Phone notes, stickers, sketches, whatever works. Not for grades. For us. For her. No rules except "be kind."

Student Engel: Could I, uh, try one now? Like, a small one. "Claire liked sitting on the floor during group work because chairs were too bossy." Does that sound right? I want it to sound like her, not like I'm trying to be poetic.

Student Bubbles: *(pulls out her phone, opens notes)* It sounds exactly like her. I'll type it the way you said it, no edits. And we can add a silly tag like "anti-chair agenda," because she would 100% approve.

Student Engel: *(smiles at the screen, then away)* Another: "Claire once traded a whole lunch for a banana sticker, then put the sticker on my notebook and said, 'Now it's priceless.'" I pretend that sticker is still there even when it isn't. Is that dumb?

Student Bubbles: Not dumb. That's love doing a memory cosplay. I'm typing it, word for word. "Now it's priceless." Okay, say a third one if you've got it; threes feel complete.

Student Engel: "Claire hated uneven picture frames. She'd fix them in every classroom and call it 'community service.'" She'd make a show of it, too—tiny bow, fake applause. I miss... that bow. Like, a lot.

Student Bubbles: *(reads the three back, slow, like a spell)* Floor over chair, banana sticker heist, frame-straightening community service. There. They're anchored. If your head tries to argue later, we can show it receipts.

Student Engel: Thanks. It—uh—it already feels a little less like drowning and more like... carrying something on dry land. Still heavy, but doable. Except tomorrow is, you know, the date. The big one. I'm worried it'll blow the day open again.

Student Bubbles: Then tomorrow gets a side plan. We pick a route that skips the gym doors. We pack warm cheese bread as a shield. We set alarms for small breaks where we look up, count two clouds, and do one round of the star game. If the day tries to get loud, we answer with tiny, good noises we choose.

Student Engel: *(breathes in, slower)* That sounds... safe. And kind. And like something I can actually do without faking brave. After school, maybe we launch one kite-note from the park, just one. Not a ceremony. Just... hi, Claire. We remember.

Student Bubbles: I'm in. We'll keep it small, real, and ours. And if you need to cry, I'll hand you a gummy and look at the clouds until you're ready to talk again—or not talk. Both count.

Student Engel: Deal. Also, for the record, I'm glad we left when we did. The bench felt like a trap; the swings feel like a door. I, uh, needed a door.

Student Bubbles: Doors are my specialty. Well, doors and ridiculous duck hats. And being here—like, actually here, not just next to you. You're not weird for missing her. You're human. And you're allowed to miss her as long as you need.

Student Engel: *(looks up; a breeze does the thing the duck promised)* Okay. Kite later. Star game soon. Cheese bread always. And—thanks for staying. Even when I don't know how to say the things, you kind of... help the words line up.

Student Bubbles: Anytime. We'll let the swings hold what they can, give the rest to the sky, and keep the good parts close. That's the plan. Simple, but it's ours.

Student Engel: *(humming, quiet)* The park feels safest right now. After stars, can we do one kite note and then just... let the day finish without asking it for extra credit?

Student Bubbles: *(gives a small thumbs-up; the duck wobbles)* Simple mode life: slow walk to my place, couch claimed, tea ready. I'll text my neighbor we're borrowing the living room again.

Student Engel: Cheese bread as couch tax—on me. Then games, a doodle if it fits, and bedtime not-too-late. Tomorrow can be loud without us.

Student Bubbles: Deal. And if the loud still shows up, we turn it down together—volume slider, two hands.

Student Engel: *(looks up once, then back to her)* Together works. Okay—stars first. Trust the duck, trust the plan, trust you.

Sixteen twenty-seven, holding the steps

(They stay under the shade by the main pillars; after-class noise rolls in and out like slow waves. They don't move—eyes on the doors, easy posture, nothing urgent.)

Agent Anya: *(checks her phone, then tucks it away)* Sixteen twenty-seven. He said “two minutes,” and, yeah... this isn't two.

Agent Kofía: *(keeps his back on the pillar)* Mhm. Could be the library. Or he stepped out to breathe—there's that small park about two hundred meters down.

Agent Anya: If it's the park, he'll be clearing his head. Library means quiet-quiet. Either way, no chase.

Agent Kofía: Right. We stay where he expects us. No laps, no “where were you.” Just—hey, you good?

Agent Anya: *(soft)* And water, maybe. Snack if he needs one. Let him set the pace, not the clock.

Agent Kofía: Music room's a maybe too. Mr. Demi lets kids sit and listen to drums instead of talking. Low pressure.

Agent Anya: Nurse's office crossed my mind, but he'd ping us if it was that kind of day. He does tell the truth when it matters.

Agent Kofía: Yeah. And if it was just a noise day, the park's the simplest fix. Two benches, big sky, nobody asking questions.

Agent Anya: *(watches a cluster drift out, then settle)* Door should've spit him out by now, though. It's the only odd bit.

Agent Kofía: Odd, not red. Pattern's fine—we're just, uh, noticing harder because we care.

Agent Anya: Fair. When he shows, I'll keep it light—"you okay?" If he says "later," we table it and walk him to the jeep stop.

Agent Kofía: I'll back you with the vending machine joke and a bottle of water. Nothing heavy unless he asks.

Agent Anya: *(steady, patient)* Then we hold here. He knows these steps. He'll find us when he's ready.

Agent Kofía: *(settles a little deeper into stillness)* We're the easy place to land. We stay that.

Dismissal Escalation

(They hold the shade by the main pillars; dismissal thins to a manageable hum. They don't move—eyes on the doors, posture easy, nothing urgent.)

Agent Anya: *(keeps her gaze on the flow)* He's later than he said, yeah, but—if it's the park route, he'll take an extra loop. We stay where he expects us.

Agent Kofía: *(still against the pillar)* Mhm. If it's library, he'll surface when the quiet runs out. Either way, no chase, just... be here.

Agent Anya: *(small breath)* When he does show, it's water first, questions later. I'm not starting with a pop quiz.

Agent Kofía: *(dry, faint)* And I'll donate a vending-machine joke to lower the temperature. Nine times out of ten, that works.

*(A paper ball arcs in and taps **Agent Kofía** on the head before skittering to the concrete. They turn only enough to clock three boys lounging at the rail, smirks ready.)*

Student Oliver: *(hands spread, mock-innocent)* Wind's rude today, sir. Didn't mean to, you know, *aim*.

Agent Kofía: *(bends, picks up the paper, voice plain)* Keep objects to yourselves. Stairs aren't a target range.

Student Edward: *(leans into the rail)* Big afternoon guarding air? Hallway statues need hobbies.

Agent Anya: *(even, school-quiet)* Keep the steps clear, please. People are still exiting.

Student Zip: *(a quick, bright laugh)* Relax, ma'am. We're being friendly. Community spirit—paper recycling and all that.

Agent Kofía: *(unmoved)* Friendly works better without throwing things.

Student Oliver: *(tilts his head)* Cool, cool. While we're being friendly—did you see a kid we know? White hair, quiet, walks like he owes the clock money.

Agent Anya: *(steady)* We don't locate other students for you. If you're waiting, do it without names and without litter.

Student Edward: Names are free. Trash too. But if it helps, we can aim better next time—right at the bin. Or, you know, *near* it.

Agent Kofía: *(folds the paper once, pockets it)* Don't. That was your one.

Student Zip: *(smirks)* Is that a mop rule or a "we're in charge of stairs now" rule?

*(In their ears, a clean thread of audio snaps awake; a bank of screens leans closer to **Agent Kofía's** camera.)*

Command Post One (Comms): *(controlled)* Visual on Oliver, Edward, Zip at front rail. Posture: testing. Maintain cover. Confirm?

Director Ash (Comms): IDs align with Principal Grace's notes. No unusual readings. Keep eyes on crowd flow and bystanders.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): De-escalation preferred. No public disturbance. Keep the scene ordinary.

Medical Command Post — Dr. Lee (Comms): Vitals steady across the board; slight elevation on Kofía only. Avoid sudden movements. Use simple language.

Area 11 Supervisor Vance (Comms): Stealth priority confirmed. Agents, proceed with caution; de-escalation over confrontation.

Commander Echo (Comms): Understood. Tango-Blue, de-escalate. No contact, no crowding. Step them off the rail, then face front.

Agent Thorne — Second CP (Comms): Note: unverified capability rumors around the lead boy. Don't bait. Keep it boring.

Agent Anya: *(keeps her tone small and ordinary)* You three need something besides attention? Water? Directions? Otherwise, exit's that way. *(a brief chin-point at the open lane)*

Student Oliver: *(smile thins)* We're good. Just checking if the, uh, custodial committee plans to polish the principal's office next. Big mess in there, I heard.

Agent Kofia: *(calm)* Not our topic. Your topic is taking one step off the rail and letting dismissal finish.

Student Edward: *(shrugs)* One step, two steps—what's the difference? Feels like you're allergic to fun.

Student Zip: *(flutters her wings)* Yeah, seriously. We blink and suddenly we're *blocked*. Are the stairs your pets now?

Agent Anya: *(measured)* Stairs are for walking, not performances. Step back. Keep the lane clear.

Student Oliver: *(leans in a hair, testing)* Or what? You going to give us a bath again? I'd hate to get squeaky.

Agent Kofia: *(meets his eyes, unblinking)* Or you'll talk to staff about throwing things at people who asked you once to stop.

Student Edward: *(snorts)* Rules? Which ones? You're just janitors with, like, fancier posture.

Agent Anya: *(steady as a metronome)* School rules say "don't target people." Courtesy says "don't linger to intimidate." Last warning. Turn around.

Student Oliver: *(hesitates a fraction, then recovers)* Relax. We're just talking. No harm in talking, right?

Commander Echo (Comms): *(even)* Tango-Blue, end the loop. Use the line and point to exit. No extras.

Agent Anya: *(cuts it clean)* We're done. Walk.

(They hold their place under the main pillars; dismissal thins but doesn't vanish. The stairwell air feels tight, the kind that listens for trouble.)

Agent Anya: *(keeps her tone school-quiet)* We're done. Walk. Keep the exit clear and let people go home.

Student Oliver: *(doesn't move, voice raised just enough to hook attention)* Or we stay and make it interesting. I like the stairs. They echo.

Agent Kofia: *(face steady, words simple)* Step off the rail, please. No blocking, no throwing. That's it.

Student Edward: *(leans in, trying to look taller)* What if we block and throw anyway? You going to mop the attitude off the concrete?

Student Zip: *(calls past them to the hallway)* Hey, everybody—cleanup crew's giving orders now. Wild.

(Heads turn; a loose ring of students slows, some stopping completely. The noise thins into a hush made of phones and side glances.)

Command Post One (Comms): *(tight, controlled)* CP-1 has a crowd forming at front steps. Three agitators: Oliver, Edward, Zip. Demeanor—provoking.

Commander Echo (Comms): *(even)* Tango-Blue, de-escalate. Ask what they need, offer a neutral out, cue exit. Keep it ordinary.

Director Ash (Comms): *(flat)* No display, no spectacle. Maintain cover and public calm. Keep bystanders moving.

MTF Division Director Gamma-7 (Comms): *(low, urgent)* Avoid physical contact. If scene grows, we shift staff toward the knot—no uniforms.

Medical Command Post — Dr. Lee (Comms): *(clinical)* Rising tension indicators; maintain slow cadence and clear instruction to reduce sympathetic spikes.

Area 11 Supervisor Vance (Comms): *(measured)* Stealth priority. Agents, you are the quiet path. Proceed.

Agent Thorne — Second CP (Comms): *(analytical)* Lead boy cues the others. Remove the audience and he loses fuel. Keep sentences short.

Agent Anya: *(to the trio, calm)* Do you need something besides attention—water, directions, a call home? If not, exit's open that way. *(a tiny chin-tip toward clear steps)*

Student Oliver: *(voice drops, edges sharpen)* What we need is you not talking to us like you own the stairs. This is our school. Our afternoon. Our fun.

Agent Kofia: *(unblinking)* Your fun ends where other people's safety starts. Step back now.

Student Edward: *(snorts, louder for the ring)* Safety? From brooms? Please. What are you going to do—polish us until we behave?

Student Zip: *(nervous laugh, eyes flicking to Oliver)* Maybe we just go? Bell's done. Nothing to see, right?

Agent Anya: *(final-warning calm)* Last chance. Turn around. Walk. Let dismissal finish without you in the middle of it.

Student Oliver: *(smile thins; he lifts his left hand as if sketching in the air, eyes locked on Anya)* Or we make a point and everyone remembers it.

(A faint ripple wobbles the air close to his fingertips—no temperature change, no instrument spike, just a wrongness you can see if you're staring.)

Agent Anya: *(into comms, low)* Visual disturbance at Oliver's hand—minor shimmer. No instrument change.

Agent Kofia: *(into comms, even)* Hume reads stable on our side. Visual anomaly present. Holding position.

Commander Echo: *(His voice was sharp, cutting through the sudden tension in the comms)* Defuse them immediately!

MTF Division Director Gamma-7: *(His voice rising in urgency)* Gamma-7! Oliver's initiating! We need to intervene now!

Director Ash: Director Ash! Do not let him draw! Any manifestation in a civilian area is an immediate breach! Echo, contingency for localized reality anchors!

Dr. Lee: We need to clear the perimeter! Mass casualties are imminent if he creates an anomaly!

Supervisor Vance: Anya, Kofia, whatever it takes, STOP HIM!

Agent Thorne: The implications of a public manifestation are catastrophic! Get those children out!

Commander Echo: *(His voice, though panicked, remained loud and clear)* Anya, Kofia! You have direct authorization for non-lethal force to prevent manifestation! Protect the children!

(The standoff ceased. Anya and Kofia stood frozen at the edge of the scene, their non-lethal weapons still concealed, their plan thrown into immediate chaos.)

Anya: *(Her voice, surprisingly calm despite the internal alarm bells, boomed across the schoolyard)* Oliver! Stop it! You will not do this here!

Kofia: *(Stepping forward, his paper form radiating an unexpected authority)* Put the pencil down, Oliver. This isn't a game you want to play.

Oliver: *(His eyes narrowed, the pencil glowing brighter, a dark, small shape beginning to form in the air before him)* Oh, it's not a game? Just watch me!

Miss Circle: *(Her voice, sharp and commanding, echoed across the yard, her angular paper form standing at the school's main doors, her compass arm raised, pointing directly at the group)* HEY! YOU KIDS! WHAT'S ALL THIS NOISE?! DISMISSAL MEANS GO HOME NOW! STOP MESSING AROUND!

(Beside her, Miss Bloomie, thin and stern, and Miss Thavel, tall and precise, also stood. Bloomie's razor arm glinted in the late afternoon light, and Thavel's ABC blocks seemed to pulse faintly.)

(The three bullies stood frozen, their bravado evaporating in the face of the teachers' authority. Oliver's hand, still clutching the glowing pencil, trembled slightly.)

Oliver: *(His voice a panicked whisper)* I... I wasn't doing anything, Miss Circle. We were just... playing.

Miss Circle: *(Her eyes, devoid of warmth, fixed on Oliver)* Playing? In a manner that disrupts the natural order of my school? I think not. The dismissal bell has rung. Its purpose is for you to leave. Not to linger and cause trouble.

Miss Bloomie: *(Her voice, a quiet hiss)* Disorder is an impurity. It must be... excised. Now.

Miss Thavel: *(Her voice loud and sharp)* Go! All of you! Before I mark you with a permanent F for Failure to Comply!

(The other students, who had been watching the scene unfold from a distance, scattered immediately, their paper forms rustling and fluttering as they rushed to get away. The chaos was replaced by a tense, heavy silence.)

Anya: *(She quickly moves closer, keeping her voice low and steady)* Oliver, let it go. We can deal with this later. Just... go home.

Kofia: *(He takes another step, his eyes on the pencil)* Your teachers are right, Oliver. This isn't the time or the place. There are too many witnesses. You'll get everyone in trouble.

Oliver: *(He looks from the agents to the teachers, his face a mask of conflict. The power in his hand is a real, intoxicating force, but the fear of the teachers is a cold, hard fact.)* This isn't... I wasn't...

Miss Circle: *(She walks forward slowly, her movements deliberate and precise. She stops a few feet from Oliver, her shadow falling over him like a dark shroud)* You are in my presence, Oliver. And in my presence, there is only one rule: order. Your performance here is... disorderly.

Oliver: *(His shoulders slump slightly, the glowing pencil in his hand dimming to a faint, pulsing light)* I'm sorry, Miss Circle. It won't happen again.

Miss Circle: *(She stares at him for a long moment, a silence so profound that it seems to absorb all sound. Then, she gives a curt, sharp nod.)* See that it doesn't. Now go. The three of you.

Zip: *(She grabs Oliver's arm, her face pale with relief)* Come on, Oliver. Let's go. They're just mad because we're better at chaos than they are.

Edward: *(He shuffles nervously beside them)* Yeah... yeah, let's go. I'm hungry.

Oliver: *(He pulls his arm from Zip's grip, his eyes still fixed on Miss Circle. There's a look of bitter resentment in them now, a kind of challenge he's too afraid to voice. He lowers the pencil, tucking it into his pocket, the light completely gone now.)* Fine. We're going. But this isn't over. Not by a long shot.

Miss Circle: *(She watches them go, a single, precise tear of her compass arm, as if severing a thread she had no use for.)* I do not know what you speak of. For now, the matter is concluded.

Miss Bloomie: *(Her voice barely a whisper, only audible to Miss Circle)* The boy is unstable. A wild variable. We should... eliminate him before he becomes a true problem.

Miss Thavel: *(She shakes her head, her voice a low, warning hum)* No. Not yet. He is... a key. He has a purpose in the system. His actions, while disorderly, are predictable. We use him. We do not destroy him.

(Anya and Kofia watch the teachers carefully, but they seem completely unaware of their presence. They stand there for a moment, silent sentinels of the school's grim order.)

Anya: *(Her voice is a low murmur into her comms)* Command, this is Anya. Situation defused. Oliver has retreated. There was a minor visual anomaly, but no full manifestation. The hostiles have dispersed, and the civilian populace is moving off-site.

Kofia: *(His voice is rough with relief)* That was too close, Commander. We almost had a public exposure event. The teachers... they're still here. They're still watching.